FCJ-031 Gendered, Bilingual Communication Practices: Mobile text-messaging among Hong Kong College Students

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Mobile text messaging—variously known as SMS (short message service), text messaging, mobile e-mail, or texting—has become a common means of keeping in constant touch, especially among young people, in many parts of the world today. The research literature abounds with studies on the social, cultural, and communicative aspects of mobile text messaging in different sociocultural contexts in the world. In the following sections, current theoretical positions in the research literature on mobile communication will be summarised and then findings of a pilot study on the mobile text-messaging practices of university students in Hong Kong will be reported. Implications for emerging bilingual and bicultural identities and gendered sociality practices among Hong Kong young people will be discussed.

Major Theoretical Positions on the Impact of Mobile Communication Technologies: Optimism or Pessimism on Human Connectivity?

In contrast to the general celebratory optimistic tone of the promotional/advertising discourses of mobile communication companies (e.g., 'ever closer human relationships', 'closer family ties', 'constant touch', 'instant and perpetual human connectivity', and so on), cultural studies researchers generally tend to stay with a much more cautious and perhaps even pessimistic tone in their theorising of the social and cultural implications of new technologies. Although Raymond Williams was commenting on the effect of the Sony Walkman when he wrote his essay on 'mobile privatization' (1983), what he wrote there seems also relevant to our discussion of the potential impact of new mobile communication technologies:

> There is then a unique modern condition, which I defined in an earlier book (Television: technology and cultural form, 1974) as 'mobile privatization'. It is an ugly phrase for an unprecedented condition. What it means is that at most active social levels people are increasingly living as private small-family units, or, disrupting even that, as private and deliberately self-enclosed individuals, while at the same time there is a quite unprecedented mobility of such restricted privacies. (Williams, 1983: 129)

For Williams the new technologies only serve to further aggravate the modern human condition of 'mobile-privatized social relations'. To illustrate what he meant, Williams used the visual image of car traffic: people insulated in their own moving (mobile) 'shells' (cars) communicate only with their own social networks of acquaintances (people traveling in the private car) in their own mobile 'shells' without any concern for other fellow human beings in other 'shells'. There is an old Chinese saying which captures well this concern of Williams: 'Each family only sweep the snow on their own doorway and nobody cares about the frost on other people's roofs'. The modern and late modern condition of a diminishing sense of community and the increasing insulation of people into their own small 'shells' (or insulated units: houses, apartments, private cars, or nowadays private mobile phone networks) seems to be a concern that is aggravated further by new mobile communication technologies. People talk of 'detached presence'—i.e., one can insulate oneself from other people in the surroundings and withdraw into one's own private world by immersing oneself in the walkman world, or by talking or texting via the mobile phone.

This pessimism is echoed in a recent article on social theory in the wireless world by Cooper (2001). Quoting Heidegger's notion of modern technology as something which 'enframes' or converts the world into a resource to be utilised, Cooper concluded that perpetual availability is both an advantage and disadvantage—'You can run but you can't hide': the new mobile communication technologies convert people into resources—to be constantly on call/in touch is to be constantly instrumentalised by others (e.g., employees have no excuse of not answering mobile phone calls or not responding to text messages from their boss).

This pessimism is also found in youth mobile communication studies, though expressed in a slightly different way: young people's constant use of mobile communication (e.g., mobile phoning or texting) can be seen as a symptom of a general loss of human connectivity in the modern condition, especially in highly urbanised cities. On this Lobet-Maris (2003) wrote:

8 For beneath the surface of this mobile phone usage there is first and foremost a rather desperate search for social existence, for a social connection in a world that appears less and less communicative to youth. For such reasons, as the research shows, about half of young people apparently would be willing to receive wireless advertising messages. These are all indications... of the need for communication that some young people feel today. The rise in importance of mobile phones and pagers among young people is perhaps the most convincing sign of a 'disconnected' society. (Lobet-Maris, 2003: 91)

9 Still others in Finland are concerned about their traditional speech culture being increasingly replaced by a new 'shallow' mobile communication culture. For instance, Puro (2002) expressed worries that traditional Finnish speech culture which values silence and direct, informative, matter-of-fact talk in phone conversations is now being replaced by new speech cultural practices that characterise mobile phone usage: shallow, small talk. Puro lamented 'nokialization' and warned of the gradual loss of the traditional Finnish way of life.

10 Poststructuralist researchers might be cautious about Puro's (2002) largely structuralist, static construction of a binary, reductionist, 2-culture theory: old and new cultures, with new mobile communication technologies seen as bringing in the new culture (way of life) which replaces the old culture (way of life).

11 In light of the above discussion, it seems that a situated approach to the study of the impact of new communication technologies might be more useful. It might be a good idea to stay away from some general, grand narratives (whether in a pessimistic or optimistic tone) about modernity and late modernity, and to take each specific context in its own right to describe the multifarious ways in which new communication technologies interact with existing social practices. One might not want to fall into the dichotomous trap of either celebratory optimism or cautious pessimism—both are grand narratives which seem to focus mainly on some form of technological determinism, and which are likely to miss out the diverse, local, and often contradictory ways in which the impact of mobile communication technologies is played out in different sociocultural contexts of the world. For instance, recent studies on Asian youth text-messaging practices seem to end on an optimistic note about the positive uses of SMS by young people.

Studies on Youth Text-Messaging Practices in Asian societies

12 Few studies can be found on youth SMS practices in Asian societies. Here I shall summarise two recent studies on this topic. A recent study in Japan (Ito and Daisuke, 2003) studied the kind of social structural factors that relate to unique patterns of mobile phone usage, particularly text messaging of teenagers in Japan. It is found that Japanese teens' penchant for text messaging is an outcome of a wide range of factors. These include the unique expressive functions and styles of this form of communication but also most importantly factors that relate to adults' control and surveillance in particular places. Japanese youth, particularly high school students, move between the places of home, school, and urban space that are all subject to a high degree of regulation and surveillance by adults. Even public urban space is highly regulated by certain codes of social conduct and a whole range of regulatory efforts that limit or constrain young people's ways of communication on public transport. Youth peer groups and couples lack ownership and control of place and couples and friends have few opportunities for private conversation. Mobile text-messaging has thus fulfilled an important function which provides a sense of co-presence for young people who lack the means to share some private physical space free from adults' surveillance. The SMS communication technology thus provides an infrastructure or a tool for young Japanese teens to open up a space for safe private communication and sociality that escapes the traditional disciplining and surveillance structures and apparatus controlled by adults. Given the relative cultural proximity between Japanese sociocultural norms governing youth behaviour and those of the Hong Kong society, where it is equally crowded and difficult for young people to find their own private space free from adult surveillance, it will be interesting to see whether similar or different patterns of youth SMS practices can be found in Hong Kong.

13 Another recent study in Taiwan (Yeh, 2004) consisted of in-depth interviews with 11 young people, 7 male, 4 female, aged 20-25 and their phone messages were also collected for textual analysis. It is found that SMS is used to negotiate subtle gender relations, especially among couples (e.g., after quarrelling, the other does not want to hear one's voice; avoiding embarrassment when making romantic advances or when saying 'no' to such advances). The informants also expressed that

those messages that they will keep are usually messages that are highly private or messages that are highly meaningful.

Thus, both recent studies on Asian youth text-messaging end on an optimistic note about the positive uses of SMS by young people for gaining freedom from surveillance by adults or for negotiating subtle gender relations. This is in line with Goggin's (2004) observation that young people took to text-messaging as a tactic of consolidating their shared culture, in distinction from the general culture dominated by their parents and other adults.

No studies on Hong Kong young people's SMS practices, however, can be found in the literature. It is thus in the spirit of preliminary, situated exploration that a pilot study on the SMS practices of Hong Kong college students was conducted in September 2004, to take an initial look at what roles SMS might play in the everyday life of some young educated people in Hong Kong. Details of the study are presented in the next section and implications will be discussed in the final section.

Mobile Text-messaging (SMS) in Hong Kong: A Pilot Survey among College Students

Hong Kong has been one of the places with the highest penetration of mobile phone service in the world for many years. From 1998 to 2003 the number of mobile service subscribers had increased 1.5 times. The number reached 7.19 million by the end of 2003, representing a penetration rate of 106% (Source: www.info.gov.hk). Despite this high mobile phone penetration, SMS is not as widespread as in other economically developed Asian societies such as Singapore, the Philippines or South Korea. The TNS Asia Telecoms Index shows that only 43% of Hong Kong cellphone users use SMS and the average number of messages sent per user per month is only 23. This is perhaps due to the fact that Hong Kong was relatively late in introducing inter-operator SMS. There has also been little promotion of SMS by the service providers in Hong Kong. Another possible reason is that mobile phone calling is relatively cheap in Hong Kong compared with other Asian cities and so people do not need to use SMS to save on phone bills. One sociocultural reason might also be the fact that unlike other Asian societies such as Japan (Ito and Daisuke, 2003) and Korea (Kim, 2002), talking loudly (especially by adults) over the mobile phone in Hong Kong public areas seems to be a common habit among many Hong Kong people and there does not seem to be great sociocultural pressure on Hong Kongers to switch their loud mobile phone talking mode to SMS mode so as not to disturb other people in public places such as the subway or the bus. SMS can thus be said to be a still largely under-developed area in Hong Kong.

A pilot study was conducted in September 2004 to collect questionnaire responses from 455 students from three different departments (English and Communication, Business, Computer Engineering) from the City University of Hong Kong. The study aims at getting some preliminary information about: who uses SMS, how often, with whom, for what purposes, and in what language(s)? The pilot study was conducted to provide some initial data on SMS practices to inform the design of a subsequent larger-scale study including both survey and ethnographic components.

Major Findings:

Below we shall report major findings of the questionnaire survey in two sections. The first section reports findings from the descriptive statistical analysis. The second section reports findings from the inferential statistical analysis.

(1) Findings from Descriptive Statistical Analysis:

The descriptive statistics will provide us with some basic information on the common patterns of the reasons for use or non-use of SMS. The findings are elaborated in the following paragraphs.

a. Reasons for non-use of SMS:

While all of the respondents are mobile phone users, not all of them are also SMS users. Out of the 455 respondents, 110 respondents (24.2%) report that they do not use SMS. Their reasons for not using SMS are (respondents can choose multiple reasons): it is expensive (24.3%), calling is more convenient (48.6%), do not have the habit of using SMS (55%). Thus it seems that many of these non-users prefer calling than texting.

b. Heavy/Light Users:

Not all of the respondents are frequent or heavy users. 48.2% of the sample can be classified as light users and 51.8% as heavy users respectively. Light users are defined as using SMS from 5-10

times a month to 5-10 times a week and heavy users are defined as using SMS from 5-10 times a day to more than 10 times a day. It can be seen that slightly less than half of the respondents are light users and slightly more than half are heavy users.

c. Frequent recipients of text messages:

One interesting question is: When one sends an SMS message, most usually whom does she/he send it to? The frequent recipients reported are (respondents can choose multiple choices): good friends (86.1%), classmates (56.8%), boy/girl-friends (43.2%), family members (23.8%), and ordinary friends (13%). It can be seen that these college students send SMS mostly to their good friends, classmates and boy/girl friends.

d. The sex of frequent recipients:

It is interesting to note that 60.5% of these college students say they most frequently send SMS to both sexes. Only 17.4% of them say that they send SMS most frequently to recipients of the same sex and 22.1% say they send SMS most frequently to recipients of the opposite sex.

e. Frequent language(s) used in writing messages (can choose multiple choices):

As for the language they frequently use to write their messages, interestingly, the majority of them (60.6%) say they write bilingually (i.e., using both Chinese characters and English words). A large proportion of them say they write in English (40.6%) and only a small proportion of them say they write in Chinese characters (17.7%). An even smaller number of them say they use phonetic writing (i.e., using the Roman letters to write Cantonese phonetically) (11.3%).

f. Perceived impact of SMS on one's own Chinese proficiency:

Do these college students feel that SMS has an impact on their Chinese proficiency? The majority of them report no impact (80.5%). Very few report a highly positive impact (2.2%) or a positive impact (5.7%) and slightly more of them report a negative impact (11.3%). Lastly extremely few of them report a highly negative impact (0.3%).

g. Perceived impact of SMS on one's own English proficiency:

Likewise, the majority of the respondents report that SMS has no impact (77.7%) on their English proficiency (77.7%). Very few report a highly positive impact (0.9 %); some report a positive impact (8.9%); slightly more of them report a negative impact (11.3%), and very few report a highly negative impact (1.2%).

h. Use of built-in/downloaded graphics:

Do they use built-in or downloaded graphics when they write their messages? The majority say 'never' (52.9%), Some say 'seldom' (26.7%); slightly less say 'sometimes' (17.2%) and very few say 'often' (3.2%). Thus very few of these college students use graphics often.

i. Use of emoticons:

A related question is whether they use emoticons. 26.2% of them say 'never'; a similar number of them (27.6%) say 'seldom'. A slightly larger number of them say 'sometimes' (33.4%) but a much lower number of them say 'often' (12.8%) . Thus not many of them often use emoticons.

j. Which language is perceived as easier to input:

When asked what language is perceived to be easier to input, the majority of respondents say that English (74.3%) is easier to input and only 25.7% of them say Chinese is easier to input.

k. Whether one reads the message as soon as one receives it:

Do they read the message as soon as they receive it? The majority of them say 'immediately' (52.9%). 40.1% of them say 'immediately most of the time'. Only 2.6% of them say 'not immediately most of the time'. Extremely few of them say 'not immediately' (0.3%). A small number of them say 'it depends on the situation' (4.1%). Thus over 90% of the respondents read their messages always immediately or immediately most of the time.

l. Whether one replies to the message as soon as one receives it:

If they mostly read the messages immediately, do they also respond immediately? This time only 14.2 % of them say 'immediately'. Close to half of them say 'immediately most of the time' (45.5%). A small number of them say "not immediately most of the time' (8.4%) and 'not immediately' (3.8%). A large number of them say 'it depends on the situation' (28.1%). Thus close to 60% of the respondents reply always immediately or immediately most of the time.

m. Whether one has sent messages to multiple recipients:

Do they send messages to multiple recipients? The majority of them say 'no' (61.3%) and only 38.7% of them say 'yes'.

n. If one has sent messages to multiple recipients, what is the nature of the message (can choose multiple options):

For those who have sent messages to multiple recipients,what is the nature of their messages? Season's greetings/birthday greetings seem to be the popular themes (46.2%) while information messages come next (39.4%). Jokes also seem to be an option (22.7%), followed by 'asking after' (18.2%).

o. Whether one keeps some of the messages:

Do they keep some of the messages? The majority of them say 'yes' (88.1%) and only a few of them say 'no' (11.9%). Thus, most of them do seem to have the habit of saving some messages.

p. If one keeps some messages, what is the nature of the messages kept (can choose multiple options):

For those who report that they save some messages, what kind of messages do they usually save? Again, season's greetings/birthday greetings seem to be the popular themes (52.5%) while romantic messages come next (43.6%). 'Asking after' also seem to be a popular theme (26.1%), followed by 'jokes' (20.1%). Only very few of them say they will save information messages (3%). Thus, it seems that those messages that they will save are largely messages with some sentimental value.

q. What kinds of purposes are SMS usually used for (can choose multiple options):

Related to the previous question is the question of what are the kinds of purposes for which they usually use SMS. Again, the majority of them report season's greetings/birthday greetings (70.3%), followed by 'asking after' (62.7%), 'giving encouragement' (56.4%), and 'giving thanks' (43.9%). Some also put SMS to romantic purposes: for dating (28.5%) and for showing love (27.3%). Some also use SMS for sharing information (29.4%), and 'jokes' (24.4%). A few of them use SMS for making new friends (7.8%) and very few of them use SMS to join games (3.5%), for recommending a TV programme/movie/song (3.8%). Even fewer of them use SMS for business transaction or investment (0.3%), for gambling (0.9%), for calling others to vote (1.7%), for persuading others to vote for a certain political candidate (0.9%), for persuading others not to vote for a certain political candidate (0.6%).

r. Reasons for using SMS instead of other means of communication (can choose multiple options):

What are their reasons for using SMS instead of other means of communication such as the mobile phone? Many of them say it is more indirect and will reduce embarrassment: 33.6%; less disturbing than phone calls (72.5%); there is no need to make a call for trivial things (43.5%); it is fun (22.9%); it is romantic (21.4%); it leaves something for future pleasurable remembrance (26.1%); one can be more certain that the other party will receive the message (29.9%); one can ask the other party to send information to you to note down (e.g., when you do not have a pen to note down some information during a call) (18%); one can reach the other party around the clock (30.4%).

s. Perceived impact of SMS on relationships with your SMS interactants:

What kind of impact do they think SMS has on their relationships with their SMS interactants? The majority of them say SMS helps them to get a little closer (54.8%). 34.3% of them say SMS helps them to get closer to their interactants and only 10.9% of them say SMS has no impact on their relationships.

(2) Findings from Inferential Statistical Analysis:

In this section we shall look at the findings of the inferential statistical tests to infer the effect of the variables of (i) Gender, (ii) Age, (iii)Department, and (iv) Frequency of Use on other variables. Chi Square statistics ($p < .05$) show the following significant effects of Gender, Age, Academic Department and Frequency of Use. In the following sections I shall first present the numerical findings of the tests and then I shall elaborate in extended paragraphs the meanings inferred from the statistical findings.

a. Effect of Gender:

- Use/Non-use: there is a significant effect of gender on use/non-use of SMS, with significantly more females (85.4%) than males (62.9%) using SMS.
- Kind of recipients: significantly more males (65.6%) than females (52.3%) send SMS to their classmates whereas significantly more females (89.4%) than males (80.3%) send SMS to their good friends.
- Gender of frequent recipients: significantly more males (33.6%) than females (15.3%) send messages to members of the opposite sex. Significantly more females (23.7%) than males (7.4%) send messages to members of the same sex. Similar proportions of males (59%) and females (60.9%) report sending messages equally frequently to members of both sexes.
- Keeping messages: significantly more females (93.5%) than males (80.3%) report keeping some messages.
- Sending season's greetings / birthday greetings: significantly more females (75.3%) than males (63.9%) report sending this type of messages.
- To make new friends: significantly more males (14.8%) than females (3.3%) report this as a purpose of using SMS.
- Keeping some messages for future pleasurable remembrance: significantly more females (30.6%) than males (18.9%) report having this practice.

62 **b. Effect of Age:**

- Use of SMS: a significantly greater proportion of older (defined as age 23 or above) students (90.6%) than younger (defined as age 18-22) students (73.4%) use SMS.
- Kind of recipients: a significantly greater proportion of older students (58.3%) than younger students (41.7%) send messages to boyfriends/girlfriends, and a significantly greater proportion of older students (35.4%) than younger students (20.8%) send messages to family members.
- Language used in writing the message: a significantly greater proportion of older students (64.6%) than younger students (37%) send messages in English. In contrast, a significantly greater proportion of younger students (64.1%) than older students (41.7%) send bilingual messages.
- Which language is perceived as easier to input: a significantly greater proportion of older students (87.5%) than younger students (72.7%) perceive English to be easier to input. In contrast, a significantly greater proportion of younger students (27.3%) than older students (12.6%) perceive Chinese to be easier to input.
- Kinds of messages to send: a significantly greater proportion of younger students (27.5%) than older students (10.6%) send jokes to others. In contrast, a significantly greater proportion of older students (33.3%) than younger students (20.4%) send romantic messages to others.

63 **c. Effect of Academic Department:**

- Use/non-use of SMS: the proportion of students who are SMS users in the English and Communication (EC) Department (86.8%) is significantly higher than that in the Business (BU) Department (73.5%), which in turn is higher than that in the Computer Engineering (CE) Department (60.7%).
- Kind of recipients: a significantly higher proportion of EC students (35.4%) than BU students (19.6%) and CE students (15.7%) send messages to family members.
- Language used in writing the message: a significantly higher proportion of EC students (63.3%) than CE students (33.3%) and than BU students (28.5%) write messages in English. In contrast, a significantly higher proportion of CE students (70.6%) than BU students (69%) and EC students (38%) write bilingual messages.
- Use of built-in / downloaded graphics: a significantly higher proportion of EC students (63.3%) than BU students (52.5%) and CE students (34%) use built-in / downloaded graphics in their messages.
- Kinds of messages sent: a significantly higher proportion of CE students (39.2%) than BU students (21.5%) and EC students (20.5%) send jokes.
- Reasons for using SMS: a significantly higher proportion of EC students (46.8%) than BU students (29.1%) and CE students (21.6%) report that one of the reasons for using SMS is that it is less direct and can avoid embarrassment.

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d. Effect of Frequency of Use:

- Kind of recipients: a significantly higher proportion of light users (23.6%) than heavy users (17.8%) send messages to ordinary friends. In contrast a significantly higher proportion of heavy users (52.1%) than light users (34.4%) send messages to boyfriends/girlfriends.
- Language used in writing the message: a significantly higher proportion of light users (45.2%) than heavy users (34.3%) write messages in English. In contrast, a significantly higher proportion of heavy users (66.8%) than light users (56%) write bilingual messages.
- Whether one immediately replies to messages: a significantly higher proportion of heavy users reply to messages always immediately (17.1%) and immediately most of the time (52.7%) whereas the corresponding figures for light users are only 11.5% and 40.8% respectively.
- Reasons for using SMS: a significantly higher proportion of heavy users (41.4%) than light users (17.9%) report that one of the reasons for using SMS is for dating; for making new friends: heavy users (15.4%) vs. light users (0.6%); for making jokes: heavy users (32%) vs. light users (17.2%); for calling the recipient to vote: heavy users (3.6%) vs. light users (0%); for it is fun: heavy users (27.8%) vs. light users (17.8%); for the reason that one can be more certain that the other party can receive the message: heavy users (36.1%) vs. light users (24.2%).
- Impact on relationships: a significantly higher proportion of heavy users (42.4%) than light users (27.4%) report that SMS use has made their relationships with their SMS interactants closer.

Discussion of the Findings

65 **a. Effect of Gender**Judging from the above statistical results, SMS seems to be a largely gendered practice, at least for this sample of university students in Hong Kong. For instance, more females than males are using it, a greater proportion of females than males are sending season's greetings and birthday greetings, and a greater proportion of females than males are sending messages to good friends and to members of the same sex. These seem to support the observation that the new mobile communication technology of SMS simply inserts itself into existing gendered practices of sociality by providing one more effective tool for engaging in existing practices; i.e., more females than males in many cultures tend to send season's greetings and birthday greetings (e.g., Christmas cards, birthday cards), and traditionally more females than males tend to be willing to spend more efforts and time in keeping up good relationships by social grooming and reciprocating communication and gifts. The new technology has not changed this gendered pattern of sociality practices but simply provides one more effective tool to those (largely females) who have been doing it with other (perhaps less effective) means of communication already.

66 However, one interesting observation is that a greater proportion of males than females report using this as a means of communication with members of the opposite sex and to make new friends. It seems that males are willing to try this new means of communication to reach the opposite sex and to make new friends. As a greater proportion of females seem to be fond of using SMS, it is then highly effective for males to use a female-preferred means of communication to reach females. To the extent that the male desire to make friends with females provides a strong incentive for males to use SMS (to try a new means of communication) to communicate with females, there is the possibility of gradually changing the patterns of communication practices of males towards more expressive or sentimental discursive practices, which are traditionally more associated with females than males, especially in more reserved cultures such as Chinese cultures. For instance, in traditional Chinese cultures, it is not easy for males (e.g., they might find it embarrassing) to express love to females explicitly, directly or verbally. The new mobile communication means provided by SMS might be a good way of facilitating or enabling young Chinese males to change their traditional cultural practices in gender relations towards more explicit sociality-oriented discursive practices.

67 **b. Effect of Age**

68 It seems that a greater proportion of older students than younger students use SMS. They seem to find English easier to input and send more English messages whereas younger students send more bilingual messages, perhaps because older students tend to have better English proficiencies. It might also be an indicator that bilingual, hybridised linguistic identities (e.g., as symbolised by code-mixing and code-switching in writing and speaking) are emerging more among younger students than older students.

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A greater proportion of older students tend to send messages to family members and boyfriends/girlfriends, and to send romantic messages whereas a greater proportion of younger students tend to send jokes. This is perhaps due to the different kinds of concerns in different age groups: older students might be more mature and family-oriented (e.g., interacting more with family members) and more oriented towards courtship (e.g., sending romantic messages to boy/girlfriends) whereas younger students are more oriented towards having fun (e.g., sending jokes).

70 **c. Effect of Academic Department**

71 A greater proportion of the English and Communication (EC) students and Business (BU) students than Computer Engineering (CE) students use SMS probably because of their higher facility with language in general than engineering students. EC students also tend to use more built-in / downloaded graphics and more of them send messages to family members. More CE students send jokes. On the other hand, more EC students report that one of the reasons for using SMS is that it is less direct and can avoid embarrassment. This indicates that EC students, given their training in language and communication, might be more sensitive to subtle aspects of communication than students in other departments.

72 **d. Effect of Frequency of Use**

73 A higher proportion of high frequency users write bilingual messages than English messages and a higher proportion of low frequency users write English messages than bilingual messages. This indicates that among the high frequency users, there seems to be an emerging bilingual linguistic identity as they seem to be quite habitual in writing messages in hybridised, mixed languages despite the fact that it is more cumbersome to input bilingual messages (e.g., one needs to first get out of one language input menu before one can get into another language input menu). Also the high frequency users might have also become more fluent in their skills of inputting and so they can easily shift between inputting in two languages whereas the low frequency users might find it much easier to just to stick to the English language input method as it requires less training than the Chinese language input method.

74 High frequency users tend to send messages to boyfriends/girlfriends and use SMS for dating whereas low frequency users tend to send messages to just ordinary friends. This seems to indicate that the heavy users might have become heavy users mainly because of the desire and need to stay in instant and constant touch with boyfriends/girlfriends. Heavy users also tend to use SMS for a greater variety of reasons and purposes, including that of calling someone to vote (although only 3.6% of heavy users report this practice, this is in sharp contrast to 0% of light users). This indicates that there is potential to induce heavy users to use SMS for a wider range of purposes including using SMS for encouraging political participation—this purpose is currently under-developed among Hong Kong users but one sees potential in developing this area of functions for SMS use in Hong Kong. Heavy users also tend to report that SMS use has made their relationships with their SMS interactants closer, indicating that heavy users feel that SMS use plays an important role in strengthening their social relationships.

Coda: Revisiting the Sociological Question: Optimism or Pessimism on the Impact of New Technology on Human Connectivity?

75 We would like to revisit the sociological question asked in the beginning section of this paper: Does new mobile communication technology bring about more human alienation (e.g., aggravating the phenomenon of 'mobile privatization' as espoused by Raymond Williams?) or does it bring about more human connectivity? For instance, what is the impact of new mobile communication technology on the sociality practices of young people in Hong Kong?

76 It might be safe to conclude that the new mobile communication technology seems to have inserted itself comfortably into existing sociality and discursive practices without initiating any radical transformation of young people's ways of life. For instance, young people use SMS to stay in frequent touch with good friends, classmates and boyfriends/girlfriends—they probably have done so with other (perhaps less effective) communication means before the arrival of SMS. However, the transformation of ways of being (e.g., sociality and discursive practices, gendered communication practices) might be gradual and might emerge invisibly as more and more young people (especially males) become SMS users for a broader ranger of purposes.

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Since the current study is a pilot study the findings are to be taken as preliminary indications rather than solid generalisations. However the findings discussed above do seem to indicate some emergent trends and patterns of SMS use among some Hong Kong college students. Among these trends, gendered differences are most apparent, and bilingual linguistic identities also seem to be emerging among the heavy users. Although dating and social grooming with boyfriends/girlfriends seem to be chief motivations for using SMS, there is also potential for broadening the uses of SMS to include that of mobilising young people for political participation.

78 Further research studies should also include ethnographic studies, communication diaries, focused group interviews as well as fine-grained linguistic analysis of SMS messages to analyse emerging bilingual texting practices which might facilitate a corresponding emergence of bilingual identities. These bilingual identities might in turn bring about bicultural identities which might lead to the expanding and hybridising of traditional Chinese cultural norms that influence gender relations, social relations, social interactions as well as sociocultural and sociopolitical identifications.

79 There seem to be emerging patterns of bilingual and bicultural identifications among young people in Hong Kong and SMS use seems to provide just another trendy medium for the expression and elaboration of such emerging bilingual and bicultural identities. For instance, in a study (Lai, 2003) of young people's cultural identification patterns and language attitudes, it was found that young people who identify themselves as Hong Kongers are also affectively inclined towards both Cantonese and English. To them, Cantonese and English are not mutually exclusive and they find it natural, or almost impossible not, to mix English words into their everyday Cantonese (Li & Tse, 2002). Also, given the special sociopolitical, historical context of Hong Kong, it seems that many Hong Kong people have not entirely accepted British colonial rule in the pre-1997 era and yet are equally ambivalent about Socialist Chinese domination in the post-1997 era. Such mixed, ambivalent feelings in national and sociocultural identification seem to correlate with the freely intertwining of Cantonese and English words in the everyday public life of Hong Kong people, and these "non-pure" bilingual linguistic practices seem to be playing an important role in marking out the Hong Kong identity—they seem to serve as distinctive linguistic and cultural markers of "Hong Kong-ness" and seem to constitute some defiant acts of identity. It is almost like saying: We're Hong Kong-ese and I don't care whether I'm speaking "pure Chinese/ English" or not!

80 In this sense then if "Singlish" is a linguistic marker of the distinctive local Singaporean identity (Chua, 2003), then the so-called "mixed code" of Hong Kong is its counterpart in Hong Kong. Like Singlish, the so-called "Hong Kong mixed code" is not a monolithic, stable entity. In practice, it consists of a whole continuum of different styles of speaking and writing, from the use of here and there a few English lexical items in otherwise Cantonese utterances/sentences to the intertwining of extended English and Cantonese utterances/sentences (Lin, 2000). From the perspectives of performativity theory on languages and communication resources (Pennycook, 2004), it will be a better idea not to view languages as separate stable systems with solid boundaries. As Pennycook (ibid) argues, the idea of languages as discrete, stable, monolithic entities with solid boundaries is actually the product of colonial knowledge production. In practice, people draw on a whole range of linguistic resources which cannot be easily pigeon-holed as "separate languages" in their everyday linguistic practices. Parallel to these hybridised linguistic practices are their similarly hybridised sociocultural identities. At least among many Hong Kong people as we witness it today, there do not seem to be any clear-cut "pure" sociocultural identities—the Hong Kong people's identity seems to be always a "hyphenated" one, indicating its "in-between-ness" (Abbas, 1997).

81 It seems then that new mobile communication technologies might interact with existing patterns of sociocultural identifications and discursive practices to produce gradual change in these practices as well as in communicative practices between males and females. These further questions can only be addressed in future more comprehensive studies.

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