

## Chinese Use of Mobile Texting for Social Interactions: Cultural Implications in the Use of Communication Technology

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**Abstract:** The current study adopted culture in the framework of social construction to examine Chinese use of mobile texting for social interactions. The findings uncovered that Chinese use mobile texting for relationship maintenance, social network construction, social coordination, emotional support, and business interaction. Chinese cultural values of collectivism, personal relationship, high context communication, and high power distance were related to most of the social interactions through mobile texting except for social coordination. Examining the cultural implications, both the generality and particularity of Chinese use of mobile texting for social interactions were discovered and understood better because of the cultural fit between a particular communication technology and people who use this communication technology.

**Keywords:** Mobile texting, cultural values, social interactions, communication technologies

### 1. Introduction

China currently has the largest number of mobile phone users in the world. By the end of 2010, mobile phone subscribers in China reached 850 million, according to a report of the Chinese Ministry of Industry and Information Technology (CMIIT, 2011). About 7 out of every 10 people in China own mobile phones. As one of the most popular functions of the mobile phone, mobile texting offers the potential for interpersonal interactions as well as business communications, such as advertising and marketing (Ling, 2010; Mahatanankoon & O'Sullivan, 2008). Through mobile phones, Chinese sent more than 830 billion text messages in 2010 (CMIIT, 2010). Mobile texting accounts for more than 50% of the revenue of China Mobile, one of the largest mobile phone service providers in China.

Because of the immediacy, convenience, and low cost, Chinese use mobile texting widely. They chat, exchange greetings, pass on jokes, and flirt through texting. They can even vote for their favorite television idols with mobile texting. Nine out of ten mobile phone users in China send text messages, compared to only 49 percent of mobile phone users in the U.S. (CMIIT, 2010). The current study attempts to study Chinese use of mobile texting for social interactions by examining their cultural implications through the framework of the social construction of communication technology.

### 2. Social Interactions through Mobile Texting

As mobile texting has become one of the most popular communication technologies, scholarly researches about the use of mobile texting in different disciplines have been growing

after the early 2000s. These researches include a wide range of scholarly interests, such as mobile texting use for patient reminders (e.g., Downer, et. al. 2006), library support (e.g., Herman, 2007), commercial purposes (e.g., Bamba & Barnes, 2007), and political campaigns (e.g., Prete, 2007). The most common focus is on social interactions (Thurlow & Poff, 2011).

Personal relationship formation and maintenance are the most important social interactions through mobile texting in everyday life. Using the actor-network theory and a qualitative research method, Thompson and Cupples (2008) evaluated mobile texting in a network of interdependent factors, such as material components of mobile phones, socio-spatial relations, and mobile phone corporations, which they defined as “digital sociality” (96). As an integral part of everyday life in the digital sociality, mobile texting was used by teenagers in New Zealand to maintain personal relationships and supplement face-to-face interactions regardless of oppressive surveillance by adults. With a nationwide survey in Japan, Ishii (2006) did a comparative analysis of landline phone, mobile voice phone, mobile texting, and e-mail in terms of their effects on interpersonal relationships. It was discovered that mobile texting helped maintain personal relationship through supporting face-to-face communications among existing relationships. To overcome their shyness in communications, Japanese young people with low social skills were also found to use mobile texting to maintain existing relationship bonds. Uy-Tioco (2007) similarly found that a group of Filipino mothers on the East Coast of the U.S. used mobile texting to maintain their real-time relationships with their children back home. With texting messages, mothers asked their children how their day was and whether school went well, reminded them to eat dinner and finish their homework, and bid goodnight regardless of physical distance. These message exchanges allowed the overseas mothers to connect with their children and maintain their role of motherhood in the familial relationships.

With mobile texting, people can develop their personal relationships further. For example, Igarashi, Takai, and Yoshida (2005) examined the development of face-to-face social networks and mobile texting mediated social networks among a group of first-year undergraduate students. They found that the students rated their relationships as more close and intimate when mobile texting was used in the maintenance of relationship. Mobile texting could promote “selective relationship formation” as compared with large and loose relationships (Igarashi, Takai & Yoshida, 2005, p.707). The mobility of mobile texting increased the frequency of communication that could increase the depth and breadth of interpersonal relationships. After analyzing the configuration of communication relationships in Korea through different communication media, Kim et al. (2007) also found that mobile texting as well as mobile phones was used to advance relationships among those with strong social ties, such as nuclear family, while text-based computer-mediated media were used more to expand relationships in weak social ties.

In terms of the message content, studies uncovered the social function of texting in different interactional contexts. After studying Nigerian texting interactions, Chiluba (2008) classified all the texting messages into economic, social, and personal categories. Through the analysis of messages, he found that most of the messages fell into the social and personal categories. Laursen (2005) studied the normative behaviors and interactional patterns in mobile texting messages among Danish adolescents and evaluated the relationship consequences for different replying norms. When the replying norms were broken, various reminders or “repair work”

(p.71) in texting messages were implemented to coordinate the relationships.

Some studies found expressive uses of texting messages that allowed people to reach out to each other for social and emotional support (Ling, 2004; Riviere & Licope, 2005). The messages exchanged through mobile texting may not appear significant or meaningful. The expressive uses of the messages usually take the form of a conversational tone because texting is meant to maintain “the sense of ambient accessibility” or “co-presence” for social and emotional support in interactions (Ito & Okabe, 2005, p.264). These uses include good-night messages (Laursen, 2005; Harper, 2002), holiday greeting messages (Ling, 2004), and sharing of jokes and other word games (Riviere & Licope, 2005).

Some other studies examined the social coordination function of mobile texting that included setting up times and places for meeting face-to-face (Campbell & Kelley, 2006; Ling, 2004), sharing social and physical space (Ito & Okabe, 2005), and even managing challenges in romantic relationships (Harper, 2002; Ellwood-Clayton, 2005). The social coordination function could be illustrated by Ito and Okabe’s discussion about mobile texting for pre-contact and post-contact interactions. For pre-contact interactions, mobile texting was used to arrange meetings and send out confirmations. For the post-contact interactions, mobile texting was used to express appreciation and add forgotten information. Even during a meeting or gathering, through mobile texting people maintained an “augmented co-presence” and could be excused from sharing social and physical space even if they were 30 minutes late (Ito & Okabe, 2005, p.270).

From the review of the literature above, the following is the first research question in the study:

*RQ1:* In what ways do Chinese use mobile texting for different social interactions?

In the literature, gender and age were the two factors that most affected the use of mobile texting across different countries. First, females were found to text more frequently and send longer and more complex messages than males (Lin, 2005, Höflich & Gebhardt, 2005). Females were also found to use texting for social coordination more than males (Lin, 2005). Females were more active in maintaining relationships and keeping them stable (Igarashi, Takai, & Yoshida, 2005). In terms of messages, females tended to communicate more social and emotional support through expressive use of mobile texting (Ling, 2005). Males focused more on practical, informative, and factual information (Kasesniemi, 2003).

The use of mobile texting was also closely related to different ages. Across different countries, significant higher percentages of teens and young adults used mobile texting daily compared with the percentages of older people (Ling, 2007). With unique interaction patterns and linguistic formulations in texting messages, youth used mobile texting to keep cohesion with their peers away from parental surveillance (Laursen, 2005; Ling, 2010; Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004). Young users, particularly teens, used mobile texting more for expressive purposes through lighthearted messages, while the texting messages of older adults were more instrumental (Ling, 2010). Older people were also found to use mobile texting to maintain personal relationships with their core family members (Riviere & Licope, 2005). The following is the second research question:

*RQ 2:* How do age and gender affect Chinese use of mobile texting for social interactions?

### 3. Cultural and Social Construction of Mobile Texting

In the current study, social constructivism of communication technology is the theoretical framework for cultural study of mobile texting. Social constructivism claims that social interaction shapes social behavioral patterns regarding technology use through negotiations among various groups of people (Fulk, 1993; Fulk & Boyd, 1991; Leonardi, 2003; MacKenzie & Wajcman, 1985). Social interaction constructs different uses and effects of communication technology. Thus, the use of communication technology is shaped more by the social interaction it facilitates.

In the same theoretical framework is the need to investigate communication technology's cultural fit (Xia, 2011). As the convergence of social, political, and economic contexts, culture shapes people's expression and drives each other's social interactions (Brock, 2005). Along the same line, Leonardi, Leonardi, and Hudson (2006) called for more studies to consider culture as a critical part of the social construction process. After extensive review of studies of mobile text messaging, Thurlow and Poff (in press) called for new research directions of "deeper engagement with the cultural context and communicative practices" in examination of communication technology as well as language use in communication technology (p.14). When Goggin (2006) proposed a research agenda for cultural studies of the mobile phone, he called for "further, extended, and systematic and comprehensive studies" of mobile phone use in different national cultural contexts (p.358). In addition, Goggin used mobile texting particularly as the example to illustrate the need for more research and theoretical inquiry to examine the distinctive features of mobile phone culture.

While communication technology is increasingly similar across the world, cultural patterns do affect the day-to-day usage of mobile phones, according to the literature of cross-cultural comparisons of information and communication technologies (Baron & Segerstad, 2010). Because of diversity, not all people in a cultural group may fit national or cultural stereotypes. However, some factors in cultural values in most societies can shape people's behaviors in many contexts. Thus, there are stereotypes about "taciturn Finns" and "loquacious Italians" (Baron & Segerstad, 2010, p.14).

In the literature, the use of mobile texting in Chinese culture has not yet received much research attention. Few studies have explored Chinese use of mobile texting. Applying the paradigm of uses and gratifications, shortcomings in mobile texting, unwillingness-to-communicate in the research framework, Leung (2007) found that students in Hong Kong used mobile texting as a social technology because of its convenience, low cost, and functionality for coordinating everyday events. Students who were socially anxious, unwilling to communicate face to face, or irritated by the confusing acronyms used in texting tended to use less mobile texting. After examining the dynamic interactions between mobile uses and surrounding cultural contexts, Sun (2009) did a comparative case study of mobile texting in the U.S. and China. She found that people in the U.S. sent messages to their friends for fun or sharing experiences through "small talk" (p.252). On the other hand, mobile texting was deeply embedded in ordinary Chinese people's life. Mobile texting was used to stay in contact with all kinds of friends for both formal and informal communications in China. The texting messages covered a wide range of topics, such as borrowing money, buying a house, reviewing

sports games, and sending gifts. In his lengthy discussion of the relationships among mobile phone short messaging service, media, political power, and citizenship in China's information society, Latham (2007) discussed in detail how mobile texting has transformed Chinese day-to-day social interactions and communication practices. With billings of mobile messages exchanged during the holiday week for the Chinese New Year, Latham concluded that mobile texting already functioned as a "succinct metonymic indicator" of social interaction change in China (p.300). Through subscription information services, mobile texting became a mass media, keeping Chinese up to date on current affairs, financial news, entertainment, sports, and travel information. A combination of group or mass mailing and individualized reception and forwarding, mobile texting was also used to organize grassroots political movements, such as a nationalistic anti-Japanese protest in 2005 in China.

From the intersection of two bodies of literature, the following is the third research question in the study:

*RQ3:* How do Chinese cultural values affect Chinese use of mobile texting for social interactions?

#### 4. Method

The current study used surveys to collect data. Through the help of the research's friend, the marketing department of China Mobile in Beijing was contacted and agreed to help with the study. With his support, in each of three major Chinese cities, Beijing, Shanghai, and Chengdu, surveys were mailed to the randomly selected subscribers of China Mobile in the summer of 2010. Altogether, 1,654 surveys were mailed back in the three cities. Because of evident mistakes, 36 surveys were not included in the analysis. The total sample ( $N=1,618$ ) participants were 56% male and 44% female with the mean age of 43 years old. The following are the demographic statistics about different age groups.

Table 1. Demographic Statistics of Age Groups ( $N=1,618$ )

Age Groups	Number	Percentage
Under 18	112	6.9%
18-30	505	31.2%
31-40	430	26.5%
41-50	310	19.2%
51-60	203	12.5%
Above 60	90	5.6%

##### 4.1. Instrumentation

There were two measurements in the study: social interactions through mobile texting and Chinese cultural values. Both measurements were self-report surveys containing numerous items. The scale to assess social interactions through mobile texting was developed according

to the literature and refined from focus group interviews. The scale to assess Chinese cultural values was adopted from the previous study (Xia, 2006) of cultural impact on mobile phone adoption in China.

#### **4.1.1. Social Interactions through Mobile Texting**

Items used in the literature about social interactions through mobile texting, such as expressive use, social coordination, and emotional support, were included in the survey. In order to include the social interactions that might be associated with Chinese culture, a focus group of five Chinese was used to refine the social interaction items related to Chinese use of mobile texting. A total of 24 items covering a range of social interactions through mobile texting were constructed in the test. These categories included different ways of using mobile texting for social interactions, ranging from emotional support to social coordination, relationship maintenance, and social network construction. A 5-point Likert scale was used with “1” meaning “strongly disagree” and “5” meaning “strongly agree” to rate each item of social interactions through mobile texting. A pilot test was conducted with a convenient sample of 43 Chinese mobile phone users. Items that were found to be ambiguous and redundant were taken out. The final scale had 15 items.

#### **4.1.2. Chinese Cultural Values**

This measurement has 16 items that evaluate four categories of Chinese cultural values: collectivism, personal relationships, high power distance, and high-context communication styles. The scale was originally created and used to study the impact of Chinese cultural values on Chinese adoption of mobile telephony (Xia, 2006). After a factor analysis for principal components with varimax rotation, the scale was found to have Cronbach alpha of .82.

### **5. Findings**

The first research question asks in what ways Chinese use mobile texting for the purpose of social interactions. The principal component factor analysis was conducted to group the 15 items of social interactions through mobile texting. A varimax rotation on the items was used to better explain the correlations among potential factors. The criteria for loading factors were an eigenvalue greater than 1.00 and a factor loading of at least .60. Five interpretable factors emerged explaining 87.28% of the total variance (Table 1).

Table 2. Factor Analysis of Social Interactions through Mobile Texting (N=1,618)

Items	Mean	SD	Factors				
			1	2	3	4	5
<i>Relationship maintenance</i>							
I text my friends saying “hello.”	4.12	1.12	.90				
I group text my friends greetings whenever there are holidays.	3.92	1.19	.84				
I text my friends about how I am doing very often.	3.56	1.14	.76				
I text to chat and kill time with my friends.	3.21	1.17	.70				
<i>Social network construction</i>							
I text my contact information to newly known friends.	2.88	1.02		.64			
I text my newly known friends to get to know them better.	2.64	1.12		.68			
<i>Social coordination</i>							
I text to arrange time and place to meet.	3.68	1.34			.90		
I text to clarify things in our last face-to-face conversation.	3.86	1.04			.84		
I text my friends to arrange time for a voice call.	3.42	1.02			.88		
<i>Emotional support</i>							
I text to let others know I care about them.	3.20	1.22				.88	
I text to show my support when my friends have hard time.	3.80	1.04				.76	
I text my friends my appreciation for their help.	2.88	1.36				.68	
<i>Business interaction</i>							
I update my boss my work progress through texting.	2.84	1.01					.76
I text my colleagues to talk about work.	3.64	1.22					.68
I pass around useful ads and business promotion messages through texting.	4.20	1.14					.78
Eigenvalue			5.88	3.78	3.24	2.70	1.86
Percentage of variance			36.60	20.04	12.06	10.08	8.50
Cronbach’s alpha			.92	.84	.90	.76	.74

Note: N=1,618 (total variance: 87.28%)

The first factor was “relationship maintenance.” This factor consisted of four items suggesting that Chinese use mobile texting to maintain personal relationships. The mean scores for these items were the highest indicating that relationship maintenance was a major way Chinese use mobile texting. This factor had an eigenvalue of 5.88 and explained 36.6% of the total variance. The second factor was “social network construction” with the eigenvalue of 3.78 and 20.04% of the total variance explained. It included two items that mobile texting was used to get to know new friends better. The third factor was “social coordination” that included three items with the eigenvalue of 3.24 and 12.96% of the total variance explained. Mobile texting was used to supplement the other communication formats, such as setting up time and place for face-to-face communications, clarifying issues in face-to-face communications, and planning a voice call. The mean scores for the items were the second highest indicating that



social coordination was another major way of using mobile texting in China. The fourth factor was about “emotional support” with the eigenvalue of 2.7 and 10.08% of the total variance explained. It included three items that expressed feelings among texting users, including showing support and care and communicating appreciation. The last factor was about business communications through mobile texting, including planning work with colleagues, updating one’s boss about the work progress, and sharing ads and other business promotion information among friends. It had the eigenvalue of 1.86 and 8.50% of the total variance explained.

The second research question evaluates how age and gender affect the use of mobile texting for social interactions. A series of multiple regressions were conducted with age and gender as the predictor variables and different social interaction factors as the criterion variables (Table 2). Age and gender were significantly related to social network construction through mobile texting ( $R = .38$ ,  $F = 4.02$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Younger ( $\beta = .32$ ) and female ( $\beta = .24$ ) users built their social network through texting more than older and male users. Age and gender were also significantly related to the use of mobile texting for emotional support ( $R = .18$ ,  $F = 3.04$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Younger ( $\beta = .25$ ) and female ( $\beta = .28$ ) users tended to communicate emotional support through texting. Age was the only factor that was significantly related to the use of mobile texting for business interactions. Older users ( $\beta = .18$ ) used mobile texting for business interactions.

The third research question asks about the effect of Chinese cultural values on the use of mobile texting. A series of multiple regression analysis of different cultural values on the uses of mobile texting was conducted (Table 2). Chinese cultural values on collectivism and personal relationship were significantly related to Chinese use of mobile texting to maintain relationship ( $R = .26$ ,  $F = 4.18$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Personal relationship and high context communication style could predict Chinese use of mobile texting to construct social networks ( $R = .18$ ,  $F = 3.24$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Collectivism and personal relationship could predict Chinese use of texting to show emotional support for friends and families ( $R = .14$ ,  $F = 2.68$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Finally, personal relationship predicted Chinese use of texting for business interactions in everyday life ( $R = .16$ ,  $F = 3.04$ ,  $p < .01$ ). As for the social coordination through mobile texting, none of the cultural values were significantly related.



Table 3. Multiple Regression Results of Age and Gender Predicating Different Social Interactions through Mobile Texting

Independent Variables	Relationship maintenance		Social network construction		Social coordination		Emotional support		Business interaction	
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Age	.08	.16	.31	2.12*	.03	.32	.25	2.02**	.22	1.84*
Gender	.14	1.02	.20	3.04**	.12	.68	.42	3.84**	.03	.42
Linear Combination	$R = .06$	$F = 1.08$	$R = .38$	$F = 4.02**$	$R = .08$	$F = 1.02$	$R = .18$	$F = 3.04**$	$R = .12$	$F = 1.68*$

Note: \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

Table 4. Multiple Regression Results of Chinese Cultural Values Predicating Different Social Interactions through Mobile Texting

Independent Variables	Relationship maintenance		Social network construction		Social coordination		Emotional support		Business interaction	
	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
Collectivism	.14	2.02**	.00	.25	.02	.42	.25	3.02**	.02	.24
Personal Relationship	.25	3.46**	.18	2.27**	.06	.88	.21	2.64**	.12	1.64*
High Power Distance	.12	.20	.00	.12	.04	.64	.08	.40	.18	2.88**
High Context Communication	.08	.42	.12	1.42*	.08	1.04	.02	.18	.06	.55
Linear Combination	$R = .26$	$F = 4.18**$	$R = .18$	$F = 3.24**$	$R = .04$	$F = 1.24$	$R = .14$	$F = 2.68**$	$R = .16$	$F = 3.04**$

Note: \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

## 6. Discussion

Chinese used mobile texting to maintain personal relationships, construct social networks, and convey emotional support among friends and families, which matches the findings about mobile texting for social interactions in other countries (Thompson & Cupples, 2008; Ishii, 2006; Rivere & Licope, 2005; Ling, 2004). Different from other countries, people in China used mobile texting for business interactions. They talked about work with their colleagues, reported work progress to their boss, and passed around business and ad messages through mobile texting. In the literature about mobile texting for social interactions, mobile texting has been studied mainly as a way of personal communication. One explanation about Chinese use of mobile texting for business interactions is the high penetration of mobile phone and popularity of texting among mobile phone users. More than half of China's 1.3 billion population own mobile phones and almost all mobile phone users use mobile texting. Each day, Chinese sent out billions of messages through mobile phones. As the most popular and convenient way of communication, mobile texting becomes a part of personal life, which blurs the distinction between one's personal and business communications.

According to the regression analysis, age and gender were found to affect Chinese use of mobile texting. Supporting the finding of Ling (2010) that mobile texting was "a type of age related phenomenon" (p.285), age was closely related to Chinese use of mobile texting for social network construction, emotional support, and business interactions. Across the world, younger people, including teens, were found to use mobile texting to establish themselves as independent social actors through getting to know new friends and building their own personal relationships (Ling, 2005; Laursen, 2005; Ellwood-Clayton, 2005). Younger users tended to engage in more expressive uses of mobile texting to communicate emotional support for their friends and families in China. Older users placed more emphasis on the instrumental uses of mobile texting that can explain their use for the purpose of business interactions. As indicated in the previous studies (e.g., Xia, 2011), older users of mobile phone preferred voice calls for emotional support to texting messages because of more personalization and directness of voice calls. In the literature, males and females used communication technologies in different ways. For example, through email females talked about private matters more than males and tended to build more intimate relationships (Boneva, Kraut & Frohlich, 2001; McKenna, Green & Gleason, 2002). According to the regression analysis, females in China built social networks through mobile texting more than males, consistent with the literature about females' more active involvement in social networks mediated by mobile texting (Igarashi, Takai & Yoshida, 2005). As females could develop more emotional bonds in social networks and have more emotional exchanges (Kasesniemi, 2003), it is not surprising that females also used mobile texting to communicate emotional support more than males in China.

Chinese use of mobile texting for social interactions can also be better understood in the cultural framework. According to the regression analysis, Chinese cultural values were significantly related to the use of mobile texting for relationship maintenance, social network construction, emotional support, and business interaction. On the other hand, none of Chinese values could predict the use of texting for the purpose of social coordination.

Both kinds of use can be explained by Katz and Aakhus's (2002) theory of *Apparatgeist*

about personal communication technologies. *Apparatgeist* is defined as “the spirit of the machine that influences both designs of the technology as well as the initial and subsequent significance accorded them by users, non-users and anti-users” (p.305). On the one hand, with this theory, Katz and Aakhus explained the general patterns of perceptions and uses of personal communication technologies. Katz and Aakhus pointed to the consistent patterns of mobile phone use in people’s negotiations across different cultures. Katz and Aakhus defined the logic of perpetual contact underlying *Apparatgeist* as the notion of pure communication or the ideal of sharing one’s mind constantly with another. Katz and Aakhus argued that personal communication technologies offer people the means for perpetual contact and people use these technologies in a consistent way across cultures. As in other cultures, Chinese use mobile texting as a way of coordinating social activities, including setting up time and place to meet, clarifying issues in face-to-face communications, and even setting up time for voice calls. The generality of this kind of use of mobile texting was explored in different studies as micro-coordination and hyper-coordination of social activities (Campbell & Kelley, 2006; Ling, 2004).

On the other hand, *Apparatgeist* claims that particular practices in the use of mobile phones vary from country to country. Katz and Aakhus also argued that the logic of perpetual contact dictates the social development of mobile phone use in the interaction of people in a particular culture. The particular practices of Chinese use of mobile texting are socially developed involving Chinese cultural values. These particular practices are the interaction fit between Chinese culture and mobile texting as a communication technology. The fit also defines the particularity of Chinese use of mobile texting.

This particularity of Chinese use of mobile texting can be understood better when cultural specifications are considered as the context of communication technologies, as indicated in the literature about Chinese use of mobile phone (Chu & Yang, 2006; Xia, 2006). In the regression analysis, personal relationship consistently predicts the use of mobile texting for social interactions, including relationship maintenance, social network construction, emotional support, and business interaction. The smooth and harmonious personal relationships are critical Chinese values (Yang, 1994). Mobile texting allows connections and contacts to take place regardless of space and time limitations. In the focus group conducted to refine the measurement, people mentioned that one of the major ways to use texting in China was to group text holiday greeting messages to one’s friends. Whenever there are holidays, such as the Spring Festival, the May First Labor Day, and the Autumn Festival, people group text holiday greetings and blessings to their friends, relatives, and family members. The group members that they tend to send messages to can be as many as hundreds. While turning a mobile phone into a mass media communication platform, Chinese realize that their need for constant communication in their cultural values finds the perfect fit in mobile texting.

Closely connected with the value on personal relationship is collectivism in Chinese culture. Collectivism emphasizes integration with others and prioritizes the needs of the group over the needs of the self (Xia, 2011). In the regression analysis, the value about collectivism was a significant predicting factor for the use of mobile texting for the purpose of relationship maintenance and emotional support. With a strong sense of in-group belonging, an individual in Chinese culture is a social being first that emphasizes the process of mutual interactions in one’s personal relationship. Mobile texting makes mutual interactions as the core value of

Chinese collectivism conveniently fulfilled. People text each other to show their care, love, and support when needed. As a factor affecting emotional support, mutual interactions in collectivism function more as a kind of phatic ritual than as any meaningful communications.

In the regression analysis, in addition to the value of personal relationship, Chinese high text communication style was significantly related to social network construction through mobile texting. On the continuum from high to low context, Chinese culture is on the high end (Hall, 1976). A high context culture tends to have the information in communication implicit (Hall, 1976). With high context culture, Chinese normally have indirect mode of communication and infer from the contextual cues about unstated meanings. As a way of indirect communication, mobile texting does not have the media richness and directness as in a face-to-face interaction. Thus, mobile texting can leave some comfortable room or distance among friends who do not know each other well in “a new and potentially daunting environment” (Thompson & Cupples, 2008, p.99). This high context communication style matches the indirectness of mobile texting that can work as a way to start friendship and relationship. It is common in China that people text contact information to newly known friends and get to know each other better. Mobile texting becomes a venue to overcome shyness and awkwardness in the interactions (Uy-Tioco, 2007, Ishii, 2006)).

As a final factor in social interactions, business interaction in China becomes an important part of mobile communication including mobile texting. It is normal for an average person to receive more than two dozen ads and product promotions each day. People also forward useful information to friends. While mobile communication is used mainly as an interpersonal communication technology in other countries, a mobile phone can function as a mass media communication platform in China when group texting or mass texting is used to broadcast information in business interactions (Xia, 2011).

## 7. Theoretical Implications

The current study adds to the theoretical debate between technological determinism and the social construction perspective of communication technology. With technological determinism, researchers are interested in the effects of different communication technologies on different societies and diverse cultures. A mobile phone is often viewed as an artifact whose effects can be pre-figured and pre-determined on different cultures. On the other hand, researchers who study different communication technologies from a social construction perspective argue that the social interaction shapes social behavioral patterns regarding technology use (Boczkowski, 2004). Through negotiations among various groups of people, the meanings in people's use of technology are constructed (Leonardi, 2003).

Thus, in the literature, the majority of researches evaluate the mobile phone either as a decisive agent that exerts homogeneous impact on different cultures across the world or as an artifact whose meanings and effects are socially negotiated and “thus inherently malleable” (Leonardi, Leonardi, & Hudson, 2006, p.203). Exploring the cultural meanings of different uses of mobile texting, the current study is able to capture both the generality of mobile texting and the particularity of usage in the consistent social interactions among users. As in other cultures, Chinese use mobile texting to coordinate various activities, such as setting up time

and place to meet each other, in social interactions. Younger as well as female users tend to use mobile texting to construct social networks and communicate emotional support more. On the other hand, cultural values of collectivism, personal relationship, and high context communication help uncover the particular meanings of mobile texting for different social interactions, including relationship maintenance, social network construction, emotional support, and business interaction in China.

## **8. Future Research**

The current study used surveys to collect data. For the future studies, qualitative methodologies can be used to understand more of the cultural meanings of Chinese use of mobile texting. The current study used three major Chinese cities (Beijing, Shanghai and Chengdu) as the research field. The generalization of the findings to other areas in China needs more investigations. The current study used four categories of Chinese cultural values. As China has been through major social, economic, and cultural changes, Chinese cultural values should include more categories. In this study, the survey about mobile texting was designed according to the literature and refined after a focus group investigation. Since new communication technologies are updated fast, new uses as well as new formats of mobile texting keep appearing in the market. The survey should also include these new applications in the future studies. As one factor that affects the use of mobile texting, age was used as one continuous variable in the analysis. For the future studies, age can be parameterized to a nominal variable as different age groups. Thus, the relationship between specific age groups and the use of mobile texting for social interactions can be uncovered.

The relationship between Chinese culture and mobile texting may not be generalized to other communication technologies, such as the Internet. More studies are needed to compare the uses of different communication technologies for the purpose of social interactions. In addition, the use of mobile texting as a mass media platform in the current study indicates another important area for future research. As an interpersonal communication technology, the mobile phone is studied as a technology for micro-coordination and hyper-coordination of social activities (Ling & Yttri, 2002). In the current study, group texting and mass texting turned mobile phones into a mass media communication platform. Communication scholars might focus on the ways in which mobile texting functions to disseminate news and information in the context of today's mass media communication.

## **9. Conclusion**

The current study has expanded the social construction perspective to include culture in the framework to examine Chinese use of mobile texting for the purpose of social interactions. The findings uncover that Chinese use mobile texting for relationship maintenance, social network construction, social coordination, emotional support, and business interaction. Chinese cultural values of collectivism, personal relationship, and high context communication are related to most of the social interactions through mobile texting except for social coordination. Examining the cultural implications, both the generality and particularity of Chinese use of mobile texting

for social interactions are discovered and understood better because of the interaction process between a particular communication technology and people who use this communication technology.

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## Appendix 1

### Chinese Cultural Values

**Please circle one number that represents your perception and ideas about Chinese values.**

1. I love to go to my friends' gatherings in my spare time.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
2. I always ask my friends when I can't make up my mind.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
3. I think that good friends are part of my family.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
4. I choose to follow the group's decision when I have a different idea.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
5. I always try to fit into my group after I change my job.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
6. Good personal relationships are an inseparable part of my life.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
7. When I get to know a person, I always keep a record of his or her name, contact information, and his or her background information for the future use  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
8. I deeply believe in Chinese saying: "An extra friend adds an extra route."  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
9. I am confident that I have good relationship networks.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
10. I normally accept my boss's ideas even if I have different ones at the beginning.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
11. When I was in school, I never challenged my teachers in classrooms.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
12. I accept inequality as a social fact since the sociality is itself hierarchical.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
13. I don't like to talk to people who are really straightforward.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
14. I try very hard to get the meanings between lines when I talk to others.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
15. I always leave some room for flexible interpretation when I communicate with my friends  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree

16. I group text my friends greetings whenever there are holidays.

Strongly Disagree      1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

## Appendix 2

### Social Interactions through Mobile Texting

#### Demographic Information

Your age is:

Your gender is:

Your education:

Your approximate annual income:

**Please circle one number that represents your perception and use of mobile texting.**

1. I text my friends about how I am doing very often.

Strongly Disagree      1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

2. I text to let others know I care about them.

Strongly Disagree      1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

3. I text my friends saying "hello."

Strongly Disagree      1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

4. I text to chat and kill time with my friends.

Strongly Disagree      1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

5. I text my contact information to newly known friends.

Strongly Disagree      1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

6. I text my newly known friends to get to know them better.

Strongly Disagree      1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

7. I text to arrange time and place to meet.

Strongly Disagree      1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

8. I update my boss my work progress through texting.

Strongly Disagree      1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

9. I text to clarify things in our last face-to-face conversation.

Strongly Disagree      1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

10. I text my friends to arrange time for a voice call.

Strongly Disagree      1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

11. I pass around useful ads and business promotion messages through texting.

Strongly Disagree      1      2      3      4      5      Strongly Agree

12. I text to show my support when my friends have hard time.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
13. I text my friends my appreciation for their help.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
14. I text my colleagues to talk about work.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree
15. I group text my friends greetings whenever there are holidays.  
Strongly Disagree    1       2       3       4       5       Strongly Agree