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## **When Indian Women Text Message: Culture, Identity, and Emerging Interpersonal Norms of New Media**

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### ***13. When Indian Women Text Message: Culture, Identity, and Emerging Interpersonal Norms of New Media***

ROBERT SHUTER, PHD

#### ***Introduction***

Although text messaging has exploded in popularity worldwide, there is scant research on the social and interpersonal norms guiding its use, particularly when communicators send or read texts while conversing with others (Pew, 2010). In a recent cross-cultural study of text messaging that I conducted, I found that “textiquettes”—emerging interpersonal norms of text messaging—that differed between cultures were quickly developing in India and the United States and appeared to be linked to indigenous cultural values in each society (Shuter & Chattopadhyay, 2010). Although different textiquettes were identified for each country, several findings regarding the specific difference of the text messages of Indian women were particularly puzzling, which serves as the genesis of the study reported in this chapter: Why did women in India engage in text-messaging patterns that were significantly different than their female and male counterparts in both countries?

This author found that women in India sent and read texts more often when they were alone and also that they received more negative reactions from conversational partners when they sent texts in their presence. Both patterns were significantly different for Indian men who rarely sent or read texts when alone—preferring instead to text message around family members—and reported seldom receiving negative reactions from others when texting. Similarly, US women and men sent and read text messages predominantly around friends, much less frequently when alone, and rarely, if ever, reported receiving negative reactions for texting when conversing with others. Although it may not be surprising that Indian women preferred texting alone given the

negative reactions they reported receiving from others, it was not clear from the results why they received such negative reactions from others, significantly more than did men. Why do Indian women prefer sending or reading text when alone and with friends? This chapter explores these compelling questions and offers a sociocultural explanation that attempts to link interpersonal norms of text messaging to identity, gender roles, and power/hierarchy within Indian society.

### *Text messaging/new media and gender in India*

Mobile phones are more plentiful in India than any country on the globe, with more than 400 million cell phone users, which is about one third of India's population (Giridharadas, 2009). In India, mobile phones often replace computers since there are 65 times more cell phone connections than Internet links. Despite the penetration of mobile phones throughout India, women's ownership of phones may be significantly lower than men's, although there is no reliable data on the number of female subscribers in the country. However, data on mobile adoption in South Asia, including Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India, suggest that more than twice as many males tend to acquire phones than females (Johar, 2009). Moreover, 74% of Indian women who own mobile phones report that men control the budgets and decisions regarding mobile technology (Zainudeen, Iqbal, & Samarajiva, 2010). A recent Stanford University study conducted in India finds that mobile phones significantly decrease domestic violence and empower women by giving them immediate access to social services and family planning agencies (Lee, 2009). For example, more than 50% of calls to social service agencies from women originated from mobile phones, according to the Stanford study, which prompted the investigators to conclude that mobile phones may increase Indian women's autonomy and economic independence if they had more access to them.

In addition to mobile phones, there is ample evidence that women in developing countries like India have less access to a variety of information and communication technologies (ICTs)—which has been referred to as the *gender divide* in ICTs. (Gurumurthy, 2004; Primo, 2003; Zainudeen, Iqbal, & Samarajiva, 2010). For example, only 22% of Internet users in Asia were identified as female in a study conducted in 2000, as compared to 38% in Latin America and 6% in the Middle East (Hafkin & Taggart, 2001). In a 2010 investigation in India, 23% of Internet users were women and just 8% of married Indian women with children used the Internet (Johnson, 2010). Gender disparities in Internet access in developing countries have been linked to lower levels of education and literacy among women, which is further complicated by poverty and traditional cultural values that restrict the autonomy

of women (Karl, 1995). In India, for instance, home computers were found to be used predominantly by men and children regardless of income, largely because a computer is often viewed in India as masculine technology that requires sophisticated technological skills perceived to be less compatible with women (Johnson, 2010).

In terms of text messaging, there is minimal research on its social functions in Indian society and even less on the digital divide. What we do know is that text messaging, referred to as SMS in India, is very popular and is used for a variety of purposes including interacting with family and friends, shopping, locating employment, and even communicating opinions during live television shows (Giridharadas, 2009). Small Indian businesses often use text messaging because it is inexpensive and the only electronic connection the enterprise has. It is interesting that text messaging is also sometimes used by males in India to meet women, which traditionally has been arranged by parents (Donner, 2009). SMS is employed in India to send monetary remittances to electronic payment facilities and, in certain parts of the country, utilized in elections for voting. Zainudeen, Iqbal, & Samarajiva (2010) find no significant differences in SMS use in India among poor men and women. A curious finding is that women in India are able to type their own text messages regardless of their literacy. Mobile access in India, according to these investigators, is essential to using SMS, and as long as there is a gender mobile divide, Indian women will have less access to SMS and its increasingly important social functions.

Because India is still a patriarchal society, it is not surprising that women are treated differently than men with respect to information and communication technology (ICT) access and ownership. Professional women in India express frustration at being employed in the digital economy in a patriarchal society—a sign of changing women's roles in India—and, yet, being responsible for taking care of home, children, spouses, aging parents, and extended families members (Kelkar, Shrestha, & Veena, 2005). A woman's identity in India has traditionally been tied to her family—a daughter to her parents, a wife to her husband, a mother to her son, a daughter-in-law to her husband's parents—and to executing the duties associated with the roles they play in these relationships (Kabeer, 2005). With the explosion of urbanization and globalization in India in the 20th and 21st centuries, this traditional view of Indian women has been challenged (Ng & Mitter, 2005). Now, Indian women in middle and upper income homes are encouraged to further their education, attain undergraduate and graduate degrees, and compete with men in the marketplace for professional careers. Bhasin (2000) argues that because of the patriarchal nature of Indian society, even professional and college-educated women must satisfy myriad social expectations of family life as they pursue career goals, as well as subordinate themselves to their husbands,

who continue to exert control over their daily lives, which seems to include decision making about, access to, and ownership of ICTs.

### ***Text messaging and college-educated Indian women: Studies 1 and 2***

The investigation (Study 1) that identified the divergent text-messaging patterns of Indian women was a quantitative study, which secured its data through the text-messaging logs completed by 23 college-educated Indian females between the ages of 18 and 25 living in India. Although the logs contained a significant amount of data derived from an examination of the participants' recorded responses to survey questions, which were answered after they sent and received a certain number of text messages, Study 1 was limited methodologically because it did not use qualitative approaches to generate initial data or follow-up findings. As a result, it was determined that Study 2, the investigation conducted for this chapter, would be completed qualitatively, using in-depth interviews to explore the results of selected text messages by Indian women identified in Study 1. Sixteen college-educated Indian women between the ages of 18 and 25 who were living in the US were interviewed, each for two-and-a-half hours. All interviewees had lived in the US for less than two years, had frequently engaged in text messaging while living in India, and were college undergraduate or graduate students attending the same Midwestern university. Thirteen interviewees were single and three were married. The interviews explored several topics concerning Indian women's attitudes and behaviors about text messaging, generated from the results of Study 1, in greater depth: the specific negative reactions reported by the Indian women and the source of these reactions, as well as why these women tend to send and read text messages when alone and with friends.

Interviews were conducted in two stages: First, college-educated Indian women were contacted with the assistance of Campus International at a Midwestern university. Utilizing Seidman's (1991) approach for conducting in-depth interviewing, each interviewee first filled out an open-ended survey that requested information about the person's life history, including social and family background, marital status, education, work history, personal and professional interests, duration of stay in the US, and the frequency and nature of her text-messaging behavior while living in India. Based on survey responses, open-ended questions were developed for each interviewee that explored sociocultural factors highlighted in the interviewee's background that may have influenced the person's text-messaging behavior while living in India. Two-and-a-half-hour interviews provided sufficient time to also probe, in a more general way, the interviewees' perspectives on why the Indian women in Study 1 reported receiving negative reactions from conversational partners when they sent and read text messages. Data were analyzed after each

interview and preliminary themes isolated, and then the data were refined and modified again—a process outlined by Schatzmann & Strauss (1973). Four themes were identified regarding the text-messaging patterns of Indian women, each of which is discussed in relation to the following condensed questions explored in this investigation:

1. What types of negative reactions do Indian women receive from conversational partners when sending or reading text messages, and what precipitates these reactions?
2. Why do Indian women tend to send and read text messages when they are alone and with friends, unlike their Indian male counterparts who generally text message among family members and rarely alone?

### ***Results***

All interviewees agreed that Indian women, both married and single, were more restricted than Indian men in their text-messaging behavior. Interviewees were not surprised that Indian women in Study 1 reported receiving negative reactions from conversational partners when they sent and received text messages; in fact, all interviewees had experienced similar reactions at some time from conversational partners when text messaging while conversing with others. Interviewees also identified with subjects in Study 1 who reported that they often sent and read texts when alone and with friends rather than around family members. Data analysis identified four themes according to which negative reactions from conversational partners may have been triggered, causing Indian women to text message when alone: (a) family, gender, and text messaging; (b) marriage, gender, and text messaging; (c) “eve teasing,” or public sexual harassment, gender, and text messaging; and (d) text messaging, social media, and gender.

#### ***Family, gender, and text messaging***

Interviewees reported that the family restricted and monitored text messaging of Indian women significantly more than they did of Indian men. In Indian society, women generally live at home until marriage, a tradition that springs from the historical view of Indian women as requiring protection from the vicissitudes of society and the advances of unfamiliar males who are seen to threaten to compromise the purity of females. This “conservative” view of women, as interviewees termed it, is omnipresent in contemporary India and was prevalent in each of their households even though they were raised in families where one or both parents were college educated. Protection of women, interviewees agreed, was particularly keen for single females,



with teenage girls and women in their early 20s receiving very close monitoring from parents, male siblings, and extended family members. Interviewees reported that they grew up in what one respondent called a "cocoon," in which parents ensured that their teenage daughters were constantly supervised and monitored, including being driven to and from school, escorted to events by male escorts who were usually family members, and—with the advent of new media—restricted and scrutinized when engaging in text messaging.

Indian parents were very suspicious when their daughters, rarely their sons, sent or read a text message in the home. The primary concern of parents, according to interviewees, was that their daughters would initiate text relationships with male strangers who the family did not know and had no hand in arranging. Most interviewees recalled that whenever they received a text message while at home, their mothers would instantly ask them the identity of the sender, and, if the response was not satisfactory, mothers would request to examine their phones, attempting to ascertain the gender of the sender. It is interesting that interviewees reported that they never declined when parents asked to examine their text messages and believed at the time, and at the time of the interview, that their parents had their best interests at heart.

To avoid conflicts with their parents, many interviewees reported that they engaged in a variety of text-messaging strategies to conceal text messages sent and received from their parents. For example, young single women living at home would often wait until late at night, when their parents were sleeping, to either send or read text messages. Messages from males that interviewees wanted to retain were often filed in their mobiles under girls' names and phone numbers, just in case parents examined their phones. For many interviewees, the safest route was to delete all text messages everyday from their phones, a common precaution of Indian females to ensure that messages from senders, regardless of gender, would not be found and misinterpreted by parents.

Some of the interviewees lived in joint family systems, which further complicated their text messaging while at home. In joint families, several generations live together, often in the same domicile, with grandparents, because of their age, exerting a good deal of control and making many decisions. Grandparents were often unable to use new technology and criticized it, blaming it for many social problems, including young women eloping with strangers, a major family issue in India. Since text messaging is not well understood or viewed favorably by grandparents, they policed its use in the home, often forbidding young women, and even boys, to engage in it. It is not surprising that Indian women avoided text messaging in front of grandparents and other family members, preferring to text when alone and with close friends.

It should be noted that young single Indian women living in dormitories at universities across India were not plagued by family surveillance of their text messages. On the contrary, these women reported that, once they left their homes for university life, parents were unable to monitor their text messages. These women were able to text message whomever they pleased, regardless of gender, and not worry about the watchful eyes of parents. They also were more apt to text message in public settings and around friends. On returning home for vacations or summer break, however, Indian women were, again, subjected to close scrutiny by parents and questioned about their text messaging, according to interviewees. It is estimated that less than 15% of Indian women attending Indian colleges live in dormitories (Norton, 2009).

Researchers have suggested that traditional collective societies other than India also pose unique challenges for women when utilizing mobile devices and other forms of new media/technology. Ito and Okabe (2005) suggest that young Japanese women use mobiles to differentiate themselves and, hence, create boundaries with older generations of Japanese, who may not be as technologically friendly or savvy. Dheepa and Barani (2010) detail how technology, knowledge, and transfer can empower women in particular; however, the values of traditional collective societies are often obstacles to women's use of technology. Singh's (2001) research also demonstrates the empowering potential of new media/technology for women in traditional collective societies, suggesting that once women become skilled at using the Internet, for example, it becomes a "tool" for securing goods and services and increasing economic empowerment.

### *Marriage, gender, and text messaging*

Interviewees reported that married Indian women often received negative reactions when they sent or read text messages in the home when husbands, children, or extended family members were nearby. Inextricably tied to family, Indian women, whether college educated or not, are viewed instrumentally—their identity, self-worth, and social value emerge from the quality of care they provide to family members and their dedication and loyalty to the extended family. Kakkar (1998) notes that Indian girls are socialized from childhood into believing that successful marriages require that they assume a subservient role and learn to be modest, unquestioning, and self-denying. Any activity or task that interferes with the primary responsibility of Indian women—caring for husband and family—is perceived unfavorably, and text messaging appears to fit in this category.

It is not surprising that Indian women reported that their husbands were often critical of them when they sent a text message in their presence. Husbands frequently asked, according to interviewees, who they were texting



and, sometimes, admonished their wives for sending or reading a text. Indian men, however, considered it acceptable for themselves to text at home and assumed that they should not be questioned by their wives. In addition, when Indian women "date" their husbands-to-be in excursions generally arranged by both families, they were careful, according to interviewees, not to text message very much, if at all, concerned that their male partners would not like it. The gender-based disparity over text messages is common in Indian households and, according to interviewees, has caused married Indian women to text message in private, apart from husbands, children, and extended family members.

A newly married Indian woman is generally required by custom to leave her family home and live with her husband, his parents, and, in the case of a joint family, her husband's extended family members (Best & Maier, 2007). The mother-in-law is normally responsible for inducting her daughter-in-law into the culture of the family, which generally includes teaching her the duties and responsibilities associated with care of husband, home, extended family members, and children. Closely watched by their mother-in-laws, newly married Indian women are almost always cooperative and abide by the rules of the household, sometimes fearing their mothers-in-law. It is customary that mother-in-laws are not supportive of text messaging by their daughters-in-law, according to interviewees, because it is perceived as unrelated to household duties and may delay their completion. Moreover, since married Indian females are considered to be the primary family caregiver, any activity, including text messaging, that takes time away from child care is anathema to Indian culture. Mothers-in-law frequently let their daughters-in-law know when they have transgressed the rules, particularly when they sent or read a text message in the presence of husband or children. To avoid social censure for text messaging at home, Indian women, both married and single, frequently send and read text messages while alone or, sometimes, in public settings—street corners, coffee shops, and Internet cafes—which pose other challenges for them.

### *Eve teasing, gender and text messaging*

Known as eve teasing in India, this form of communication refers to Indian men taunting, ridiculing, harassing, and sometimes accosting Indian women they do not know in public settings. A common practice in India, it is widespread, occurring in public transport, streets and alleyways, and university campuses—in fact, in any setting where, generally, two or more Indian males are gathered, and an Indian female, unescorted by a male, happens to walk by them. Typical eve teases range from whistling and ogling at a passing female to voicing loud suggestive comments and, sometimes, singing sexually explicit

lyrics from Bollywood movies. Because women's groups in India have complained frequently about eve teasing, many municipal governments across the country have attempted to curtail it by providing women with separate railway cars, off bounds for men as well as "women-only" sections on public busses (Yardley, 2009).

Data from interviewees suggest that eve teasing is rooted in the patriarchal nature of Indian society and is directed especially at single Indian women on college campuses who challenge traditional female roles by pursuing university degrees and competing with men in the marketplace. In addition to Indian college women being verbally eve teased on campus, they are often subject to anonymous eve teases sent as text messages from male students attending their university. It is common for these text eve teases to be directed at freshman Indian women by senior Indian males who secure the women's phone numbers from freshmen men who are cajoled by upper classmen to turn over the information or risk ostracism. Text eve teases, according to interview data, are often flirtatious initially and directed at appearance and frequently then escalate to more sexually suggestive comments. Always anonymous, text eve teases vary in regularity, sometimes being just a single message from an unknown male but, occasionally, multiple messages being sent by the same person. Indian college women are often unsure how to respond to text eve teases; some, for example, simply ignore these messages, whereas others attempt to block senders from sending messages. As a last resort, women will change their phone numbers or even call the sender, which women are reluctant to do, fearing they will antagonize the person. Rarely, if ever, do college women report text eve teasers to university authorities or tell their parents.

Indian women are also subject to eve teasing when they engage in text messaging in public settings. Interviewees reported that when Indian men notice women texting in public, this activity becomes the subject and object of their eve teases, triggering random comments about who, what, or why they are text messaging. One interviewee reported that a male stranger who noticed her texting actually followed her and asked her repeatedly for her phone number. Another interviewee was dubbed "Miss SMS" by a group of males who shouted this out, among other taunts, whenever she passed them. It is not surprising that whereas some Indian women refrain from text messaging in public to avoid being eve teased, others simply ignore male comments and continue texting in public, and a few—according to interviewees—fight back, confronting the eve teaser and even slapping him. It is ironic that the Indian state of Kerala is advising women to utilize text messaging to report eve teasing by typing the word "Vanitha" in a text message and sending it to the women's commission. On receipt of the message, the commission contacts local police where the eve teasing is taking place, and they are supposed to help the woman in distress (Tharakan, 2010).

*Text messaging, social media, and gender*

Since text messaging poses unique challenges for Indian women, many prefer utilizing social network sites (SNSs) like Orkut and Facebook to send messages to friends and others. According to interviewees, women generally access social media sites at Internet cafes to ensure that family members are not aware of their activities. Orkut, a popular SNS in India, operates much like Facebook and provides individuals with virtual opportunities to “friend” people across the country and to chat with them on the site. This reduces the need to send text messages; hence, for Indian women living at home, SNSs eliminate potential conflicts with parents and other family members over text messaging.

It is interesting that interviewees reported that some women utilize home computers to access SNSs, particularly when parents and grandparents are not computer savvy, which is often the case in India (Maslak & Singhal, 2008). And because parents assume that their children must be able to operate computers to be successful at school, it is considered more acceptable for Indian college women to work at home on a computer than to engage in text messaging. Unlike text messaging, chatting on SNSs is private and, when completed, the text is removed from the screen once the person logs out of the site. As a result, Indian women are far less concerned that parents will locate and read past chats with friends. With respect to married women, it appears that even though operating a computer at home is more acceptable than text messaging, computers are still perceived to be the province of men and children, distracting females from their primary family responsibilities.

*Discussion*

Data strongly indicate that women and men in India are obliged to follow different interpersonal norms—referred to as textiquettes—when they send and read text messages. According to the results, single women living at home often send and read text messages when alone and with friends precisely because they expect negative reactions from parents and extended family members if they text in their presence. Married Indian women also avoid text messaging at home around husbands, children, or extended family member because they, too, are concerned about receiving negative reactions. It seems that Indian men can send and read text messages anywhere and anytime they choose, preferring to text message at home around family members and in public settings, contexts in which it is far more difficult for women to send and read texts (Shuter & Chattopadhyay, 2010).

Different textiquettes for women and men in India reflect a deeper *gender text-messaging divide* that appears to flow from the patriarchal nature of contemporary India.

The data suggests that when single and married women text message, it is viewed as a potential threat to Indian patriarchy: Families fear single women may become too independent when they text; husbands bristle at their wives texting rather than tending to family tasks; and males on street corners shout eve teases at the sight of Indian women operating mobile technology, apparently seeing them as a symbol of gender liberation. Text messaging, like all new media, has the potential to empower humankind if access is provided equally to women and men. However, as demonstrated in this chapter, equal access to mobile technology will not solve the gender text-messaging divide unless male and female textiquettes are also altered.

### ***Conclusion***

While this investigation explores text-messaging behaviors in India, it is apparent that women in traditional patriarchal societies also face similar obstacles when utilizing other types of new media/technology due to the indigenous beliefs and values of these societies. Faulkner and Arnold (1985) found early on that technology in developing societies is associated with maleness and that it is "incongruous," as they wrote, for traditional cultures to associate technology with femaleness. Singh (2001) suggests that women in traditional societies are initially uncomfortable utilizing new media/technology precisely because they view technology as the province of men. With encouragement, support, and training, women, according to Singh (2001), become adept at utilizing new media/technology and adapting them to their needs. Wajcman (1991) offers a more global view of new media/technology, suggesting that technology itself is "gendered"; that is, the language of science and technology is conflated with masculinity in traditional and postmodern societies, which poses unique challenges for women who aspire to education and careers in technology. Hence, it may not be surprising that the uses of mobile devices and text messaging, as demonstrated in this study, are influenced significantly by the sociocultural forces that determine who uses them, how they are utilized, and the interpersonal norms that guide their use.

Equalizing male and female norms for text messaging essentially requires that Indian women become free to send and read text messages in the same settings as men without being concerned about receiving negative reactions from others. Because textiquettes, like all interpersonal norms, are inextricably tied to sociocultural forces, they are resistant to change, particularly when they are linked to long-held beliefs about identity, gender, and patriarchy. With the identities and roles of women in Indian society changing due to globalization and modernization, the transformation occurring significantly more in urban areas throughout India, there should be subsequent changes in gender-based interpersonal norms guiding text messaging. Although

India has made strides in the recent past and provided information technology to more women across the country (Sharma, 2003), this study indicates that significant change is still required not only to equalize gender access to mobile technology but also to alter cultural attitudes and interpersonal norms regarding how men and women use mobile devices particularly when text messaging.

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