

ROLE OF SOCIAL MESSAGING IN THE ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract

The adoption of social messaging applications, such as WhatsApp and LINE, has become the new approach for exchanging information in various contexts. In addition, social or instant messaging through mobile applications has become one of the most frequently used methods for communication for various organizations. An increasing number of users have adopted social messaging for work-related and leisure communication purposes owing to its low costs, fast delivery, and individual- and group-messaging benefits. The objective of this study is to explore the organizational (e.g., work flow) and personal (e.g., fun and entertaining) benefits of social messaging as a communication tool as well as its negative effects (e.g., misunderstandings and unclear messages). The scope of the study is the working environments of 4-star hotels. Semi-structured interviews are used for data collection, and content analysis is conducted to analyze the data. Results, discussions, limitations, and directions for further research are also provided.

Keywords: social messaging, communication, organizational and personal benefits

Introduction

Communication is one of the most important elements for business success. People can select from a variety of ways to send messages and information depending on their preferences; from face-to-face video calls to electronic mail. Presently, one of the most widely adopted communication methods is social messaging platforms where people can chat with individuals or groups of people, send pictures, make calls, and share files. According to Bode, Lassen, Kim, Shah, Fowler, Ridout, and Franz (2016), social media and social messaging have become highly popular in different dimensions, including in politics.

Furthermore, with its growing number of users, social messaging applications have become increasingly popular not just among friends or family but also among work colleagues for communicating work-related issues and other social matters (Moreno-Munoz, Bellido-Outeirino, Siano, & Gomez-Nieto, 2016). In addition, social messaging has been adopted by consumers to communicate with businesses (Ashraf, Hou, & Ahmad, 2018; Testa, Russo, Cornwell, McDonald, & Reich, 2018).

This new method of communication is expected to support the effectiveness and efficiency of workflow and aid information exchanges among colleagues at a very low cost. Moreover, Employees can expect a high degree of work productivity from the benefits of such applications. However, the main focus of this study is the advantages and disadvantages of adopting social messaging for organizational and personal purposes to gain an in-depth

understanding of such communication method.

The hotel industry is the context of the study because hotel businesses have one of the most diverse and complex working environments (Becker & Wang, 2016). Given its multidimensional aspects, hotel employees provide services such as housekeeping, sales and marketing, and front of the house operations for local and international guests. With hotels offering round-the-clock services, communication among the employees is the key to supporting working operations. Ladkin and Buhalis (2016) noted that using new communication technologies, including social media and social messaging, may help in facilitating numerous processes and in improving the quality of work. However, limited studies have been conducted on the benefits and limitations of this new technology in the hospitality sector. Therefore, this current study attempts to explore the use of social messaging applications from the perspectives of organizational and personal dimensions.

Additionally, guidelines and implications are provided for the improvement and development of employees and organizations in supporting the use social messaging in the workplace.

Literature review

Social messaging

Social messaging is defined as a messaging service based on systems other than SMS, MMS, or email and which have a social component, such as Facebook's chat feature (Mesch et al., 2012). In 2015, more than 20 social

messaging applications were available on Android and other mobile operating systems for smartphones (Walnycky, Baggili, Marrington, Moore, & Breitinger, 2015). Social messaging applications can be used through mobile phones, tablets, or computers and are tied to a social network, thus allowing people to stay connected in real time (Kim et al., 2012).

Social networks and social messaging applications provide platforms for users to connect and share content. However, a few differences exist between social networks and social messaging applications, including audience size, duration, and intent. Social messaging acts primarily as a one-to-one (or -few) communication mechanism, which can either be brief or long-lasting. The content of social messaging applications is intended to be private, or at least directed only toward a specific group. A social network, which consists of many-to-many connections, is durable and capable of producing network effects. When one uses a social network to publish information, it acts primarily as a many-to-many broadcasting mechanism, and the content of a social network is essentially public (Longo, 2014).

Currently, several mobile messaging applications have added social networking features to meet the growing demand for free mobile calling and SMS services. Various free mobile messaging services exist, including WhatsApp, WeChat, LINE, and Facebook Messenger.

Communication

People send and receive information to communicate and understand one

another, and several means exist to support effective communication, such as face-to-face interactions, telephone calls, or the use of other tools (Lundy & Drouin, 2016). Furthermore, communication between people in organizations, personal relationships, or politics or public information campaigns, leads to understanding and information flow among those involved in the process. Communication is generally defined as a process of sending, reviewing, and receiving messages to share meanings. Such a communication process can be found in numerous disciplines, ranging from psychology and sociology to engineering, technology, and artificial intelligence (Mumby, 2012).

Concepts in the communication process include the sender, the receiver, messages, feedback, encoding, decoding, and interference (Al-Fedaghi & Alsaqa, 2009). Feedback is the reaction of the receiver to the sender's message. Encoding is how the sender decides to send the messages based on predictions or prior knowledge on the receiver. Decoding is understanding the meaning of the message that was sent. Meanwhile, interference is the outside and inside influences affecting the communication process.

Social messaging

Smartphone and tablet users around the world have adopted mobile messaging applications as the primary means for communicating, thereby replacing or complementing traditional options, such as texting. The growth of mobile application usage has increased remarkably over the past several years



and is driven by messaging and social networking applications, including social media and photo sharing, which increase in year-over-year usage (Kimme Hea, 2014; Gillen & Merchant, 2013). A few of the most popular options in this category include Snapchat, WhatsApp, Facebook Messenger, WeChat, KakaoTalk, and LINE.

According to Marquez (2003) who conducted a survey on the usage of social messaging, almost three fourths of the samples indicated that likely gossiped on social messaging applications more than on any other communication tool (i.e., telephone). Furthermore, two thirds of the respondents also use social messaging applications to set up actual social events as well as to rant and complain. Other popular activities on social messaging applications include sending birthday greetings and flirting.

Growth of the adoption of social messaging in the workplace

Social messaging has slowly gained prominence in the workplace. Data revealed that a number of people use social messaging at work (Huang & Yen, 2003). In recent years, social messaging has gained in popularity in the workplace, and social technologies have reached mainstream adoption owing to a variety of available platforms (Hunt et al., 2014). Moreover, several companies have adopted social messaging or similar tools to promote interaction among employees (Longo, 2014).

Social messaging has numerous advantages. It connects people regardless of their location, and in a business

setting, social messaging boosts company performance by speeding up operations, responsiveness, and efficiency with minimal additional costs. Colleagues can send and reply to instant messages in real time without face-to-face interactions, and work reports and other files can be shared during chat sessions. Social messaging facilitates virtual conferences, which allow a person to connect, share ideas, and reach conclusions with multiple people, without requiring people to convene in a physical meeting room. People on business trips can contact coworkers in the office through social messaging, and staff members can communicate with customers and vendors around the world. In other words, people can now directly conduct business transactions through social messaging rather than using traditional methods, such as making phone calls or sending letters (Safko, 2010). Chen, Butler, and Liang (2018) noted that social messaging is used by people across cultures and generations. People belonging to different age groups adopt social messaging and integrate its usage in their everyday lives.

Additionally, social messaging has positive effects on geographically separated offices. Employees find it easier to contact colleagues in other locations through social messaging applications rather than making phone calls (Sarker and Wells, 2003; Goggin, 2006). Ogara et al., (2014) further noted that social messaging enhanced contact among remote employees, customers, and vendors compared with any other form of communication. Moreover, Qualman (2012) determined that social messaging has proven its overwhelming value in terms of gathering input from different people in dispersed locations.



Processes that were once agonizingly slow and prone to misunderstandings and errors can now be accomplished in real time.

Furthermore, social messaging has proven cost-saving benefits in certain situations, such as group discussions. Most social messaging applications support the participation of several people in one discussion, which is more affordable and convenient than setting up a telephone conference. Meetings conducted via social messaging applications also tend to be more efficient and less prone to off-topic discussions because of the relative ease of typing versus talking (Osterman Research, 2006). A study by the Radicati Group (2004) further showed that companies could save an average of 40 minutes a day by completing daily typical tasks with social messaging. Consequently, the group estimated that an organization with 5,000 people could save \$37.5 million a year in terms of communication expenses by adopting social messaging.

According to Longo (2014), social messaging is a multitasking tool for workers, meaning that people can engage in social messaging conversations while making a phone call or going through their e-mails. Ogara et al., (2014) noted that workplace use of social messaging features can eliminate numerous internal communication problems, such as e-mail clutter, voice mails, or office visits.

Social messaging naturally encourages people to be brief and concise. Employees using social messaging at work reported it as an important tool for enhancing productivity. A total of 68% of workplace social messaging users stated that while social messaging is a

mixed blessing, it is mostly a positive technology (Huang & Yen, 2003). Social messaging increases productivity by reducing time wasted switching between various communication methods, such as emails, phone calls, or voice mails (Mesch et al., 2012).

Effects or impacts of using social messaging

According to Kim et al., (2008) and Bowdon (2014), texting can affect social relationships, academic performance, and personal safety. While personal mobile phones have promoted a sense of perpetual access (in which people are available any time, day or night), social messaging exerts considerable pressure on people to always be available. The pressure to open a message when it is received, regardless of what is happening, is high. People often feel the need to answer their phones at any time, even when they are preoccupied with something else. Thus, it is not surprising that most jurisdictions have passed laws prohibiting the use of cell phones while driving, and numerous schools have demanded that mobile phones be turned off during classes and other school events. People have reported feeling disconnected when away from their mobile phones, even for relatively brief periods.

Texting behavior has been linked to measures of physiological arousal, such as increased heart rate, respiration, and muscle tension. One potential explanation for why frequent messaging can lead to healthcare problems is that the social messaging causes young people to remain in a constant state of arousal, thereby making it difficult to relax or

sleep. This condition may lead to a considerable static load over time because of the cumulative effects of constant stress (Leena, Tomi, & Arja, 2005).

Research methodology

The current study was exploratory and conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 23 experienced representatives working in managerial positions in 4-star hotels in Bangkok. All the informants have been using social messaging applications for more than four years and are experienced in the application. The sample included respondents with a variety of working backgrounds, including sales and marketing, housekeeping, and front of house operations. A purposeful sampling approach was adopted, with three main criteria, including holding a managerial position, having more than 10 years experience working in the hotel sector, and using social messaging applications for more than four years.

Interviews were conducted in Thai by the lead author. Each interview lasted from 30 minutes to an hour. The interview questions were concentrated on three issues related to the characteristics of using social messaging, highlighting benefits and problems from their

experiences. The interview questions were pilot tested with five hotel staff members, and the questionnaire was further developed primarily by omitting unclear technical terms. The data were collected from the 23 respondents until saturation was reached.

Using the results from the interviews and documents, content analysis was adopted to identify the core themes and issues. Audio-recorded interviews provided solid references from the original source to identify potential issues, and the interviews were transcribed immediately after each session. Multiple analyses from researchers in different fields were adopted to avoid biases and to reinforce the findings.

Results

The sample consisted of experienced representatives with managerial positions in 4-star hotels in Thailand. The interviewees have been working in the hotel industry for more than 10 years with managerial positions in sales and marketing, housekeeping, and front of the house operations. This combination of diverse working backgrounds provided a broad perspective on hotel operations. Approximately half of the respondents were females, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1 Characteristics of interviewees

Respondents	Age (years)	Gender	Years working in hotel industry
Interviewee 1	40	Male	15
Interviewee 2	48	Male	17
Interviewee 3	36	Female	12
Interviewee 4	49	Female	24
Interviewee 5	39	Male	17
Interviewee 6	49	Female	25
Interviewee 7	50	Male	29
Interviewee 8	58	Female	30
Interviewee 9	49	Female	22
Interviewee 10	51	Female	26
Interviewee 11	40	Female	17
Interviewee 12	46	Female	17
Interviewee 13	47	Female	19
Interviewee 14	40	Male	16
Interviewee 15	55	Male	31
Interviewee 16	40	Male	17
Interviewee 17	50	Male	26
Interviewee 18	43	Male	19
Interviewee 19	39	Female	15
Interviewee 20	38	Male	16
Interviewee 21	44	Female	19
Interviewee 22	41	Male	15
Interviewee 23	50	Female	28

The results from the interviews provided useful information about the types of social messaging applications as well as their benefits and limitations. The most popular social messaging application indicated by the respondents was LINE, followed by Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp.

Convenience was the reason provided by most of the respondents for using social

messaging in the hotel industry. Special features, such as document, photo, and video sharing; voice messages, voice and video calls, and group chats, were included as reasons for using social messaging as the mode of communication over others modes (e.g., telephone calls and face-to-face communication).



According to one respondent, *“The reason I use it is because it is very fast and convenient. When I have to communicate with a group of people, it is easier to use LINE instead of having a group meeting”* (Interviewee 2).

Another informant said, *“I think it is fast and convenient for contacting and communicating with friends. Also, when some of my friends don’t have work at the same time as me, it is a lot easier to catch up with them via LINE. Plus, I can also send them a note, picture, or even voice messages with this application”* (Interviewee 14).

Another respondent stated that, *“The great benefit I have received from LINE and Facebook Messenger is convenience for group chatting and sharing photos. Sometimes with social messaging, you can keep track of what you or your friends have typed.”* (Interviewee 4).

Cost savings was another reason stated by the respondents for using social messaging because the Internet cost is already included in their mobile phone packages. At times, social messaging is free if done through Internet Wi-Fi.

According to one respondent, *“This way we can reach people in other countries faster, and it does not really cost that much compared to making international calls”* (Interviewee 21). Another respondent commented that, *“Social messaging is a type of communication that is convenient and saves you money as well because you can text and use LINE to call friends via the Internet”* (Interviewee 6).

Another responded expressed that, *“Social messaging is cheaper compared to making phone calls to one another*

because the Internet charge is included in the mobile package” (Interviewee 9).

The majority of the respondents reported close relationships as the personal benefit they experienced from social messaging because users can communicate with anyone anytime, and anywhere. Therefore, the respondents could maintain close connections with friends, families, and relatives in different locations.

One respondent opined that, *“Social messaging keeps you connected with the rest of the world, especially if you communicate with friends, family, and business colleagues who are abroad”* (Interviewee 23).

Another respondent commented that, *“Social messaging helps people talk more and have closer relationships. When I don’t have time to meet someone but I want to talk to him or her, I can just use LINE, and it is fun too”* (Interviewee 1).

According to another respondent, *“Social messaging created a strong relationship between me and my friends. It allows us to communicate with each other even though we are not together without having to call”* (Interviewee 8).

In terms of work-related benefits, better team communication was the most frequently indicated benefit because most social messaging applications support group chat functions. One respondent said that, *“It is good for teamwork when one or some members are not available for phone calls. Moreover, it gives everyone in the team a chance to share their own ideas and to brainstorm when we cannot have a face-to-face meetings”* (Interviewee 5).

One respondent also shared that, *“Social messaging helps me do group work well. It’s hard to communicate when there are a lot of people, and gathering a big group of people is difficult because sometime we don’t or hardly have a common free time. Therefore, social messaging helps a lot”* (Interviewee 13).

According to another respondent, *“It helps to communicate better with group members. There is no need to meet; therefore, it is very fast to get the message across. Moreover, this means that we can discuss work almost anytime during the day. It helps when you don’t want to meet someone but you need to talk to that person. You can just use LINE”* (Interviewee 17).

With regard to the negative impacts of social messaging in their personal lives, the majority of the respondents agreed that addiction was the most serious. Moreover, this negative impact was linked to work–life balance and social relationship problems because people tend to talk less to those around them and pay attention only to their phones. One comment from respondent was that, *“Addiction is a negative impact of social messaging because some people play or use social messaging too much or all the time and do not spend time talking to friends and relatives”* (Interviewee 20).

Several respondents also indicated health issues, particularly eye problems. As one respondent commented, *“I think using social messaging causes eye problems and also headaches. This is due to using your eyes all the time”* (Interviewee 3). In addition, a few respondents indicated that messages sent through social messaging applications are prone to misunderstandings. The reason for this miscommunication is because senders

cannot clearly express their feelings through texts, while receivers cannot feel the actual emotions of the senders.

Regarding the negative impacts of social messaging in the workplace, lack of clarity leading to misunderstandings was the most cited problem. One respondent stated that, *“Texting through social messaging sometimes affects clarity because words can be perceived in many ways that it could often be misunderstood”* (Interviewee 22). One respondent also commented that, *“Sometimes, using social messaging is not appropriate for crucial information because communicating via online application causes misunderstandings and is misleading”* (Interviewee 11).

Finally, the results of this study showed that the majority of the respondents intend to continue using social messaging in the future for a variety of reasons. A group of respondents stated that they would continue using social messaging in the future because of its convenience. According to one respondent, *“I will continue to use social messaging because it makes my life more convenient to connect with other people and to keep in touch with them”* (Interviewee 10). Another respondent commented, *“I will still use social messaging because it is more convenient than other modes of communication. Sometimes you cannot call your friends or they may not be available, but you can still leave a message for them”* (Interviewee 7). *“It is convenient and it is what everyone is using. If you do not use it, you can be left out of the group,”* (Interviewee 19).

Figure 1 shows the summary of the usage of social messaging applications, and the benefits and problems are categorized

according to personal or organizational dimensions. Social messaging benefits include cost savings, good workflow, virtual team communications, and fun. However, problems may arise from incomplete information or

misunderstandings of short messages. In terms of personal issues, users may experience eye fatigue or addiction from constantly using social messaging applications.

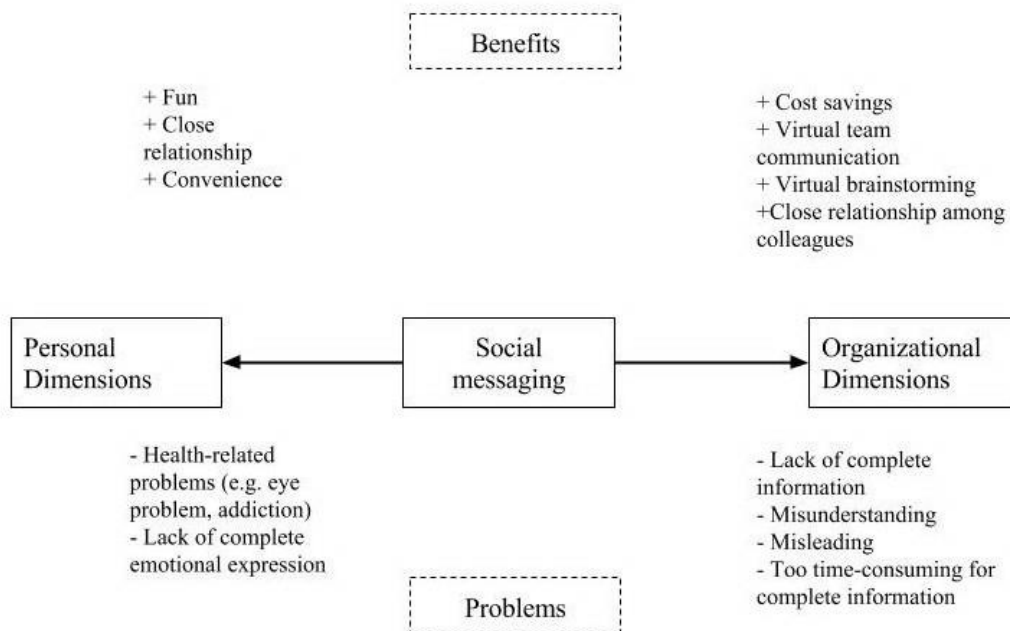


Figure 1 Social messaging benefits and problems in personal and organizational dimensions

Discussions

This study found convenience as the main reason most respondents used social messaging for communication. This result was supported by Lauricella and Kay (2013) and Bode et al. (2016) in their study on the use of text and instant messaging in higher education classrooms. The authors determined that key reasons for using text and instant messaging as modes of communication

include time savings, convenience, and ease of use.

Moreover, the respondents reported cost savings as another reason for using social messaging because Internet costs are already included in their mobile phone packages. In addition to strengthening relationships between dispersed teams, replacing phone calls with instant messaging could also save money. Hampton and Wellman (2002) noted that the cost of online contact does not vary

with distance. In comparison, physical distance increases the cost of face-to-face contact, resulting in a drop in communication frequency.

Close relationships were personal benefits that the majority of the respondents experienced from social messaging because they could communicate with anyone at their convenience (Ashraf, Hou, & Ahmad, 2018). Therefore, the respondents could stay connected with their friends, families, and relatives living in different locations. Safko (2010), Chen, Butler, and Liang (2018) and Walnycky et al. (2015) claimed that social messaging had numerous advantages because it allows people to connect with one another regardless of where they actually are. Moreover, a few respondents included fun and entertainment as other benefits of social messaging. The results of the present study are in line with those by Counts (2007) who found that for many people, group-based messaging on their mobile devices was an almost addictive new form of entertainment.

In terms of work-related benefits, better team communication was the most frequently cited by the respondents because most social messaging applications supported group chat functions. Furthermore, this study indicated that close relationships with colleagues were another work-related benefit because social messaging is easier than face-to-face communication; therefore, the respondents can talk frequently with their colleagues and become close to one another. Social messaging in the workplace promoted frequent communications while simultaneously reducing interruptions (Shen et al., 2011). Lam (2012)

investigated the impacts of text messaging services on social connectedness in student technical communication projects and found that students in social messaging groups communicated frequently and felt connected in their working relationship.

The respondents of this study also indicated health problems as negative impacts of social messaging. This result is in line with Leena, Tomi, and Arja (2005) who mentioned that texting behavior is linked to measures of physiological arousal, such as increased heart and respiratory rates as well as muscle tension. Moreover, a number of respondents mentioned that the use of social messaging could cause misunderstandings in message content because senders could not express their feelings through texts, while receivers could not clearly understand the actual emotions of the senders. Social messaging may be used to replace face-to-face communication; however, it cannot help people understand the emotional status of others (Sacco & Ismail, 2014).

With regard to work-related aspects, the respondents indicated lack of clarity leading to confusion and misunderstandings as a negative impact of social messaging. According to Huang and Yen (2003), social messaging encouraged users to be brief and concise. Hong et al. (2013) and Lundy and Drouin (2016) further claimed that texting reduced the ability of people to communicate clearly.

Furthermore, this present study showed that the lack of consistent flow in conversations was another work-related negative impact of social messaging. Hong et al. (2013) implied that

challenges experienced by organizations using social messaging as their main mode of communication include unclear or confusing messages and misunderstandings.

Regarding the continuous usage of social messaging, the present findings showed that the majority of the respondents plan to increasingly use social messaging in the future for a variety reasons, including convenience, ease of use, popularity among friends and colleagues, and usefulness. Text messaging has received increasing interests among users, and mobile messaging applications are becoming important platforms for other features such as video calls, file and content sharing, and money transfers (Lin, 2011; Kim et al., 2014)

Conclusion and recommendations

The adoption of social messaging for personal and organizational use is beneficial despite a few disadvantages that should be considered. In terms of the advantages, social messaging serves as an effective tool for communicating and sharing various forms of information, including texts, photos, and videos. In addition, social messaging enhances workplace productivity. However, social messaging can cause personal health issues and is prone to misunderstandings owing to the transmission of unclear information in the work place.

This study includes several managerial implications. First, aside from cost savings and ease of use, organizations can enhance the benefits of social messaging by adopting it as an official mode of communication. Second, the hotels can create several groups in social messaging application platforms to benefit from formal and informal communications. Third, working relationships among team members can be improved by frequent communications. Fourth, despite of the benefits of social messaging in personal and organizational dimensions, users should be concerned with its health aspect to avoid addiction or other problems.

This study has a few limitations. First, interviews were the only source of data; therefore a quantitative method is recommended for future studies. Second, the informants were selected from hotels in Bangkok. Therefore, the findings may not be generalized for Thailand and beneficial only to future research related to social messaging and communication strategies in such organizations.

Directions for future research include further in-depth investigations on the work-life balance of social messaging application users and on other types of working environments. The authors of the current study only focus on the hospitality industry. Thus, broadening the scope of the study could help enhance its practical contributions.

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