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Getting no Answer? – An Experimental Study on Unavailability in SMS Communication

Nowadays, when nearly everybody has a mobile phone, availability everywhere and every time seems to be granted. However, even if we can be contacted anywhere and at nearly any time, it doesn't mean we want to. Besides, what happens if we expect to reach someone via his or her mobile phone and are not able to? The presented study analyses how people deal with the problem of unavailability in SMS communication – meaning that a sent SMS is not answered. It focuses on the sender's perspective in regard to his or her emotional reactions and behaviour.

A sample of N = 675 undergraduate students took part in an experiment. They were asked to complete an online questionnaire being presenting in four different versions, thereby realising four different stimulus materials. Subjects were asked to imagine themselves in the following situations: After having a flirt on a party, mobile phone numbers were exchanged. Subjects should image that they sent an SMS to the new acquaintance during the next day; and waiting for an answer firstly, for one hour, secondly, for one day and lastly, for one week. Effects of the experimental manipulation of the stimulus material on the subjects' emotions and behaviour can be shown.

When mobile phones started to pervade our everyday lives, we had to learn how to deal with constant availability. As our study shows, now we have reached a point where we need to handle unavailability. People can be found who deliberately choose to be available or not to be available via the mobile phone. Thereby we all create situations of unavailability for our communication partners, what can influence their emotions and behaviour.

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