Can we text you? A qualitative exploration of young unemployed job-seekers’ attitudes to receiving resilience-building SMS messages

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Abstract

A significant minority of young job-seekers remain unemployed for many months, and are at risk of developing depression. Both empirical studies and theoretical models suggest that cognitive, behavioural and social isolation factors interact to increase this risk. Thus, interventions that reduce or prevent depression in young unemployed job-seekers by boosting their resilience are required. Mobile phones may be an effective medium to deliver resilience-boosting support to young unemployed people by using SMS messages to interrupt the feedback loop of depression and social isolation. Three focus groups were conducted to explore young unemployed job-seekers’ attitudes to receiving and requesting regular SMS messages that would help them to feel supported and motivated while job-seeking. Participants reacted favourably to this proposal, and thought that it would be useful to continue to receive and request SMS messages for a few months after commencing employment as well.

Keywords: Youth, unemployment, prevention of mental health problems, resilience, mobile phones, support
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Approximately 12% of Australians aged 18 to 24 years are unemployed and are seeking employment (ABS, 2011), and the majority remain unemployed for many months (ABS, 2010; Muir et al., 2009). This prolonged unemployment is problematic because it has been linked to a 50% increase in psychological disturbance in young people (Morrell, Taylor, & Kerr, 1998), a population already vulnerable to mental illness (ABS, 2008; Muir, et al., 2009), with the risk of developing depression increasing as unsuccessful job-seeking persists (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, & Kinicki, 2005; Paul & Moser, 2009). Depressive symptoms in unemployed job-seekers diminish self-esteem which can decrease motivation, job-search activity and employment prospects (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001; Kasl, 1982; Wanberg, Glomb, Song, & Sorenson, 2005), thereby intensifying the risk of developing sub-clinical or clinically diagnosed depression, and reducing employment prospects even further (Australian Health Ministers, 2009; Paul & Moser, 2009). Importantly, early unemployment experiences appear to negatively affect young people’s long-term working identity and job-seeking success (Hammarström & Janlert, 2002; Marks, 2005). Therefore, the prevention of depression in young unemployed people is important, and is consistent with the second priority of prevention and early intervention of Australia’s Fourth National Mental Health Plan (Australian Health Ministers, 2009).

Unemployment and Depression

Cyclic theories underpinning depression and social isolation that emphasise the operation of a feedback loop provide an explanation of how internal and environmental factors emphasise each other in the development and maintenance of depression, and can inform and drive psychological research in this area (Wampold, Davis, & Good, 1990). Such theories include cognitive theories of depression (e.g., Alloy, Abramson, Metalsky, & Hartledge, 1988; Beck, 1963, 1964, 1967, 1987; Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979; Bower, 1981; Derry &
Kuiper, 1981; Ellis, 1975, 1987), behavioural theories of depression (Jacobson, Martell, & Dimidjian, 2006; Martell, Addis, & Jacobson, 2001), and composite theories of depression that emphasise the interaction of cognitive-behavioural elements (e.g., Beck, 2002; Dobson & Dozois, 2001). Furthermore, social isolation has been identified as a factor that contributes to and maintains depression by reducing positive self-reinforcement from the environment, and magnifying the incapacitating effect of negative life events (e.g., Brown & Harris, 1978; Cutrona & Troutman, 1986).

In the context of employment, these cyclic theories explain that being unemployed and looking for work may result in negative automatic thoughts, which may trigger a decrease in positive behaviours such as problem solving and social activity, and may also trigger symptoms synonymous with low mood including decreased self-esteem, fear, and helplessness. Consequently, motivation to be with others and to job-seek may decrease, exacerbating negative automatic thoughts, and setting in motion a feedback loop that leads to depression and social isolation. In addition, unemployment itself is socially isolating because it excludes the source of social connectedness that employment provides (Jahoda, 1981); it restricts money and other resources which limits opportunities to interact socially, and it instils a perception of being inferior to employed peers (Gallie, 2006). Importantly, mood does not need to deteriorate into clinically diagnosed depression before the negative effects of depressive symptoms and social isolation emerge (Hopko, Armento, Cantu, Chambers, & Lejuez, 2003; Hopko & Mullane, 2008).

**Resilience**

Resilience - the ability to adapt positively and bounce back psychologically in the face of adversity - has been found to be a protective factor against depression, and is not solely a personality trait (Herrman et al., 2011; Mancini & Bonanno, 2010). Resilience can be learned and developed, as demonstrated in brief strengths-based resilience-building interventions that have combined interpersonal and cognitive-behavioural elements to reduce or prevent
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intense and recent emotions (Morris et al., 2010). Recently, 76% of 525 Australian online survey respondents expressed an interest in using mobile phones for free mental health monitoring and self-management (Proudfoot et al., 2010).

Prior research has effectively used SMS messages to enhance young people’s mental and physical health. Although this research did not aim to promote resilience or prevent depression in young, unemployed people, there are parallels between its participants’ needs and those of young job-seekers. For example, many interventions that helped young people to increase exercise (Fjeldsoe, Miller, & Marshall, 2010; Prestwich, Perugini, & Hurling, 2009, 2010; Sirriyeh, Lawton, & Ward, 2010), stop smoking (Bramley et al., 2005; Brendryen, Drozd, & Kraft, 2008; Brendryen & Kraft, 2008; Free et al., 2011; Free et al., 2009; Rodgers et al., 2005), or lose weight (Burke et al., 2011; Lombard, Deeks, Jolley, Ball, & Teede, 2010) used regular SMS messages to boost morale, encourage persistence, normalise participants’ situation, provide ongoing support, and monitor mood and progress.

Resilience-boosting SMS messages could potentially combat negative automatic thoughts, substitute realistic appraisals for self-defeating appraisals of negative events (e.g., an unsuccessful interview does not mean eternal unemployment), boost self-esteem, promote behavioural activation, trigger problem-solving strategies, and suggest coping strategies to improve mood. Also, supportive, regular SMS messages, regardless of content, may counteract social isolation by providing an element of connectedness and support so that the young person does not feel alone.

Hence, the aim of this study was to explore the receptivity of young unemployed job-seekers to receiving and requesting regular resilience-building SMS messages informed by cognitive, behavioural, and social isolation factors during the period of their unemployment, and their ideas about the content, formatting and delivery of such messages.
Method

Overview of Study Design

This study involved a primarily qualitative investigation of information gathered in three focus groups but also used mixed-methods through the use of some quantitative measures. The study was explicitly designed to investigate internal and environmental cognitive, behavioural and social isolation factors pertaining to the experience of young unemployed job-seekers so as to inform an understanding of support that they would find useful. Participants were sourced from BoysTown which is a national charity that provides a range of programs, including employment preparation, placement and support for young people with high barriers to employment.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was obtained from Queensland University of Technology’s Human Research Ethics Committee (ethical clearance project number 1100001551).

Participants

To qualify for focus group participation, participants had to be aged between 18 and 24 years, unemployed, looking for work, and able to provide informed consent. Participants were not required to be diagnosed with depression and no psychological screening was carried out. All participants ($N = 16$) (4 females and 12 males) were clients of BoysTown, were unemployed, had been job-seeking for 1.5 to 50 months ($M_{months} = 12.66, SD = 15.66$), and ranged from 17 to 28 years of age ($M_{age} = 20.81, SD = 3.21$). Although three participants fell outside the 18 to 24 year age range, they were permitted to participate. Data analysis revealed that their views were not contrary to the general consensus, and their unemployment experience was similar to that of other participants. Participants were not asked about their cultural background but several volunteered that they had Maori, Torres Strait Islander, Vietnamese, Korean or Caucasian Australian heritage. No participants had previous experience of attending a focus group. Participants were thanked for their time with a movie ticket.
voucher, provided by BoysTown.

Materials

Focus group background questionnaire. This questionnaire gathered information about participants’ age, gender, the number of months they had been job-seeking, their mobile phone ownership, the whereabouts of their mobile phone throughout the day, the amount of time their phone was turned on, and the conditions under which their phone was turned off.

Focus group discussion guide. A focus group discussion guide was developed prior to the focus groups. It consisted of six categories of questions that asked participants about the features of their mobile phones that they valued most, their challenges of being unemployed and looking for work, their sources of support, their opinions about sample SMS messages, their ideas for additional SMS messages that they may find helpful, their preferences for SMS message format and delivery, and their willingness to provide the researchers with weekly feedback about their progress. The discussion was permitted to move beyond specific questions asked so that new concepts and themes could emerge.

Sample SMS messages. In accordance with the idea of using SMS messages to interrupt the feedback loop of depression and social isolation at the points of negative automatic thoughts, or decreased positively reinforced behaviour, or seeking social isolation, 15 sample SMS messages were generated by the researcher and her supervisor that were informed by cognitive, behavioural and social support theory. In addition, one monitoring SMS message was designed. These messages appear in Table 5.

Smartphone. A Huawei Sonic Android Smartphone was used to send the sample SMS messages, and the mood-rating message, to focus group participants, and to receive their replies.

Laminated messages. Each sample SMS message was printed (font size 72, Times New Roman) on a fluoro-yellow A4-size sheet which was then laminated.
Procedure

Recruitment. Fliers advertising three focus groups were displayed at BoysTown’s Kingston office in Brisbane, Queensland, Australia. Participants were recruited from BoysTown Employment Services and BoysTown Enterprises by BoysTown personnel.

Focus groups. Three focus groups, each of approximately one hour’s duration, were conducted in April and May 2012. The researcher moderated the focus group sessions as the primary facilitator, and the researcher’s supervisor and a BoysTown researcher acted as co-facilitators. Focus group sessions were audio recorded. At the beginning of each focus group, participants were provided with information about the project, were given the opportunity to ask questions, and were asked to provide informed consent. All participants completed the focus group background questionnaire. Participants were then asked a series of open-ended questions about their mobile phone usage, and their experience of unemployment and job-seeking. Next, participants were sent sample SMS messages, or if mobile phone reception was poor, the laminated sample SMS messages were displayed. Participants were asked about their reaction to these messages, and their ideas for additional messages. Finally, participants were asked about their preferences for SMS message format and delivery, and their receptivity to providing the researchers with weekly feedback about their progress. Throughout the session participants were encouraged to contribute freely to the discussion, and were assured that all opinions were valid and important. The facilitators sought clarification when necessary, and the principal facilitator used member checking to wrap up the discussion of each question, and to ensure an accurate understanding of all material discussed (Bourkeault, Dingwall, & De Vries, 2010). At the end of each focus group session the facilitator summarised the discussion, and checked its accuracy with all participants. After each focus group session the researcher refined questions where necessary for use in subsequent focus groups.

Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed each focus group session verbatim. Data relating to seven
topics was extracted from the focus group transcripts: participants’ mobile phone ownership and usage; participants’ experience of unemployment and job-seeking; participants’ reactions to the sample SMS messages; participants’ additional feedback relating to the concept of using SMS messages to support young people while job-seeking; participants’ suggestions for additional SMS messages; participants’ ideas about the formatting and delivery of SMS messages; and participants’ opinions about identifying, replying to, and requesting SMS messages.

In addition, the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method (Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) was adopted to analyse the focus group transcript data that referred to participants’ experience of unemployment and job-seeking so as to inform the content of resilience-building SMS messages. The CQR team consisted of the researcher, her research supervisor, and two BoysTown researchers. The researcher and her supervisor reviewed the third focus group transcript together to extract possible domains (broad topic areas), core ideas (abstracted summaries) falling within each domain, and common themes that occurred in each core idea within each domain. The researcher repeated this process on the first and second focus group transcripts and then reviewed the outcome with her supervisor over several meetings until a consensus on the domains, core ideas and common themes was reached. Following, the researcher referred back to the raw transcribed data to confirm the accuracy of the domains, core ideas and common themes derived. To ensure that important themes had not been overlooked, the BoysTown researchers acted as auditors by reviewing the derived domains, core ideas and common themes; adding amendments according to their interpretation of the transcripts; and then engaging as a team with the researcher and her research supervisor to revisit the raw data and discuss all amendments until consensus on the domains, core ideas and common themes was reached.
Results

Mobile Phone Ownership and Usage

All participants owned mobile phones, with 10 participants (62.5%) owning a smartphone. All participants carried their mobile phones with them constantly, and 13 participants (81.25%) always kept their phones turned on. Participants’ favourite mobile phone features included sending and receiving SMS messages, making and receiving phone calls, accessing the internet, using Facebook, e-mailing, downloading applications, playing games, using the camera and alarm clock, listening to music, and getting directions. Overall, participants preferred SMS message communication over voice communication because they felt more comfortable texting than talking, and they could read SMS messages at their leisure. Hence, participants preferred to send SMS messages rather than phone others, but some would phone after checking with an SMS message that it was a convenient time to do so.

Experience of Unemployment and Job-seeking

To inform the content of resilience-building SMS messages, the CQR analysis identified four domains: ‘barriers’, ‘emotional impact’, ‘personal resources’, and ‘work-related enabling factors’ from participants’ experience of unemployment and job-seeking. These domains, together with associated core ideas, common themes, frequency of endorsing common themes, and illustrative quotes from the raw transcript data are presented in Tables 1 to 4. Frequency of endorsing common themes is shown in two ways: as participant frequency, the percentage of participants endorsing a common theme, where “General” denotes endorsement by 100% of participants, “Typical” denotes endorsement by 50 to 99%, and “Variant” denotes endorsement by less than 50%; and as focus group frequency, the number of focus groups endorsing a common theme, where “General” denotes endorsement by all focus groups, “Typical” denotes endorsement by two focus groups, and ”Variant” denotes endorsement by one focus group.

Domain 1: Barriers. Four core ideas were associated with barriers that hindered unemployed participants when job-seeking (see Table 1). The core idea that a lack of skills,
qualifications and experience created barriers was discussed most frequently, with several participants across all focus groups reporting that a lack of qualifications restricted jobs available to them, several participants in two focus groups commenting that their lack of interview skills created a bad impression in interviews, and some participants in one focus group mentioning that their lack of experience restricted available jobs. Several participants across two focus groups raised practical problems as a core idea that created barriers, namely lack of financial resources and remoteness from employment sources. The core idea of personal issues was mentioned by some participants, with participants in two focus groups commenting that family problems or the burden associated with preparing for and attending interviews made job-seeking stressful, and two participants in one focus group reporting that their emotional problems interfered with their mood regulation and concentration when job-seeking. The core idea that being judged or experiencing prejudice was a barrier to employment was mentioned by several participants, with two participants in one focus group expressing the view that their youth limited the number of jobs available to them, and one participant in one focus group sharing their perception that their appearance created a negative impression in job interviews.

**Domain 2: Emotional impact.** Three core ideas were identified in relation to the emotional impact of being unemployed and job-seeking (see Table 2). The core idea of frustration emerged most frequently, with several participants across two focus groups elaborating that they felt resentment and envy towards the employed, some participants in one focus group reporting that having to comply with the Centrelink system to retain their benefits was a burden, two participants across two focus groups reporting that job-seeking required considerable time and effort for little gain, and two participants across two focus groups expressing that being unemployed generates feelings of anger. The core idea of lowered mood was raised by several participants, with common themes expressed by several participants in two focus groups that rejection engenders feelings of sadness and disappointment, and that
failure creates feelings of disillusionment; and by two participants in one focus group that criticism from others results in feeling devalued. Isolation emerged as the third core idea, with one participant in one focus group reporting that being unemployed made them feel different to others, and that being unemployed limited opportunities for social interaction.

**Domain 3: Personal resources.** Three core ideas were identified in relation to the personal resources that participants found helpful when job-seeking (see Table 3). The core idea of connectedness was reported by the majority of participants. Participants across two focus groups found that association with concerned others and companionship contributed to a sense of feeling cared about and not being alone. The core idea of encouragement also emerged, with some participants in two focus groups reporting that they found inspirational words uplifting, two participants in one focus group expressing that useful advice helped them to persevere, and one participant in one focus group indicating that practical assistance reduced the perceived severity of their challenges. Coping strategies emerged as the third core idea, with several participants in one focus group commenting that personal distraction helped to lift their mood.

**Domain 4: Work-related enabling factors.** In relation to work-related enabling factors intrinsically linked to the experience of job-seeking, participants identified two core ideas that they found helpful when job-seeking (see Table 4). The core idea of information and skills building was reported by the majority of participants. Several participants across two focus groups found that information in the form of interview performance feedback or potential job leads, and training that imparted job or interview skills were helpful. The core idea of job-related support also emerged, with several participants across two focus groups reporting that they valued emotional support from personnel involved in helping them to find work, and two participants across two focus groups reporting that practical assistance from caseworkers or youth workers eased the burden of being unemployed and job-seeking.
Reactions to Sample SMS Messages

Participants’ reactions to the sample SMS messages appear in Table 5. Messages are grouped by their informing theory (cognitive, behavioural or social support), and appear in sequence of popularity across all focus groups. Participants’ reasons for not endorsing a message are supplied, along with any suggestions for enhancing the message, and the approval rating for the enhanced message from the focus group(s) that suggested it. The one monitoring SMS message, a mood-rating request, appears at the end of Table 5.

Participants suggested that the more oblique messages of “Somewhere inside you is something that will get you a job”, and “Remember that you are not alone – about 12% of Australians your age are unemployed and looking for work” would be better worded as “You’ve got what it takes to get a job”, and “Remember that you are not alone – lots of Australians your age are unemployed and looking for work”. The message that contained the negative word “unsuccessful” was reworded by participants to be “Remember that you can learn something from each job interview or application”. Messages that were considered to be too confronting by some participants included “Ask a friend what they think you are good at” because they feared the response, or “Who would appreciate a call from you?” and “Who is missing you right now?” because they feared that no-one would want to hear from them. They suggested that a message along the lines of “Who can you call for a chat?” or “Call a mate” would be more helpful.

Additional Feedback about SMS Messages

All participants thought that using regular SMS messages to help young people to feel supported and motivated while job-seeking was a good idea, would read such SMS messages should they receive them, and would like to continue to receive SMS messages for a few months after commencing employment. A participant asking, “Can I keep that one?” (male, 19 years, focus group three) resulted in all participants in that focus group electing to save their favourite SMS messages received during the session so that they could reread them when
feeling down or in need of motivation. Eight participants (50%) responded favourably to the idea of receiving SMS messages that contained inspirational words of wisdom from young people like them who had been unemployed for some time, and had then found employment.

A male participant in focus group two implied that messages had a maternal tone, “That is like something your mum might say”. However, 10 of the 12 male participants (83.33%) endorsed this as a positive. For example, the following excerpt comes from focus group three:

“It’d be like my mum again.” (male, 18 years).

“I’d like a mum.” (male, 19 years).

“Yeah, me too.” (male, 24 years).

“Yeah.” (male, 19 years).

“OK. So even if a message sounds like it’s from mum, that’s not all bad?” (primary facilitator).

Nods (everyone).

Participants were receptive to the concept of providing weekly ratings of their mood to the researcher, and indicated willingness to rate other constructs such as their anger levels, resilience levels, coping ability, and problem solving ability.

Suggestions for Additional SMS Messages

Table 6 contains additional SMS messages suggested by participants, grouped by their informing theory (cognitive, behavioural or social support), along with participants’ suggestions for appropriate occasions on which to send each SMS message.

Ideas about Formatting and Delivery of SMS Messages

Nine participants (56.25%) indicated that they would like SMS messages to include their name, while one participant (6.25%) said that this would be too confronting and would prefer to be addressed as “mate”. Twelve participants (75%) would like SMS messages to end with the researcher’s name. Emoticons in SMS messages were favoured by eight participants (50%).

Eight participants (50%) did not have an opinion about how frequently they would like to receive SMS messages, two to three times a week appealed to four participants (25%), more
than once a day appealed to two participants (12.5%), everyday appealed to one participant (6.25%), and once a week appealed to one participant (6.25%) who commented that it would be annoying to get SMS messages every day. Fourteen participants (87.5%) did not mind when they received SMS messages but one participant (6.25%) wanted to receive SMS messages first thing in the morning, and one participant (6.25%) wanted to receive SMS messages during daylight hours only.

All participants agreed that monitoring SMS messages should be repeated if a reply to the message had not been received within half a day. Also, in focus group three, participants indicated that their mood varied, being lighter on Fridays because they were looking forward to the weekend, and being lower on a Sunday night or Monday morning because they were dreading the challenges of the week ahead.

Opinions about Identifying, Replying to, and Requesting SMS Messages

Participants agreed that they would need to enter the researcher’s phone number and identifier into their phone so that they could identify the message sender. One participant would title the sender “friendly pick me up” (male, 24 years, focus group three). Another participant suggested marking messages as important to highlight them in recipients’ inboxes (female, 18 years, focus group one).

Fifteen participants (93.75%) were receptive to the idea of responding with a short SMS message to a weekly monitoring SMS message from the researcher, regardless of whether they had to pay for the SMS message themselves or not. Ten participants (62.5%) were charged 20c or 25c per SMS message that they sent but stated that they would not require reimbursement for SMS messages sent to the researcher.

Nine participants (56.35%) indicated that they would like to be able to request SMS messages. They identified five instances when they would like to do this: when they were experiencing low mood, prior to attending a job interview, after attending a job interview, after being rejected for a job, and after visiting a website suggested in a prior SMS message should
they require additional information about the website topic.

**Discussion**

The aim of this study was to explore the receptivity of young unemployed job-seekers to receiving resilience-building SMS messages informed by cognitive, behavioural, and social isolation factors. Overall, the information gathered in three focus groups attended by 16 participants revealed that participants were receptive to the idea of using regular SMS messages that were worded to address cognitive, behavioural and social isolation challenges of being unemployed so as to help young people to feel supported and motivated while job-seeking. Further, they thought that it would be useful to continue to receive and request SMS messages for a few months after commencing employment.

All participants were unemployed and, consistent with previous research showing that a significant minority of young people remain unemployed for an extended period of time, had been job-seeking for many months (ABS, 2010; Muir, et al., 2009). Inline with other research findings, all participants owned mobile phones (Coffey, et al., 2006; ITC, 2011; Rice & Katz, 2003), all participants carried their mobile phones with them at all times, and the majority kept their phones turned on (Baron, 2010; Walsh, et al., 2008). However, not all participants owned smartphones which highlights that messages used in an intervention should take the form of standard SMS messages that can be received and displayed on any mobile phone. Participants’ favourite mobile phone feature was the facility to send and receive SMS messages. Further, they preferred SMS message communication over voice communication because they felt more comfortable texting than talking, and they could read SMS messages at their leisure. This suggests that an SMS intervention would fit well with young unemployed job-seekers.

Participants reported four barriers that hindered them while job-seeking. Consistent with prior research, a lack of skills, qualifications and experience were identified as restricting available jobs (Muir, et al., 2009) and, in some cases, impacting negatively on interviewees’ performance in job interviews. Practical problems, in the form of limited financial resources
and the burden of living far away from employment sources were identified as factors that interfered with job-seeking. Also, personal issues that induced worrying, including stressors associated with preparing for and attending job interviews, and emotional problems of a personal nature that interfered with mood regulation and concentration while job-seeking, were identified as impediments while job-seeking. Judgement or prejudice about job-seekers’ youth, and the view that job-seekers’ appearance created a negative impression in job interviews were perceived to be a barrier to employment by some participants.

Further, participants reported experiencing three predominant emotions as a consequence of the emotional impact of being unemployed. The first emotion, frustration, manifested as feelings of resentment and envy towards the employed, feeling burdened by Centrelink’s job-seeking activity lodgement requirements to avoid suspension of unemployment benefits, feeling that a considerable amount of time and effort had to be expended on job-seeking for very little gain, and feelings of anger. The second emotion, lowered mood, emerged as a result of feeling rejected that triggered feelings of sadness and disappointment, feeling disillusioned as a result of failure, and feeling devalued due to criticism from others about being unemployed. These findings fit with prior research that links unemployment with an increase in psychological disturbance in young people (Morrell, et al., 1998). Surprisingly, the third emotion, feeling isolated, emanating from feeling different to those employed, and having limited social opportunities due to being unemployed, was reported least frequently, despite prior research finding that unemployment is socially isolating (Gallie, 2006; Jahoda, 1981). The high level of social support reported by the majority of participants may be an artefact of the extensive support that BoysTown affords its young people, and the fact that many participants had multicultural backgrounds with large, close families, and may not generalise to a wider population.

In addition, participants identified three personal resources that they found helpful while job-seeking. In accordance with the stress-buffering hypothesis (Cobb, 1976), the majority of
participants reported that a sense of connectedness, fostered through association with others who cared about them and provided companionship, attenuated the negative effects of unemployment and boosted their emotional well-being. Encouragement, in the form of inspirational words, useful advice, and practical assistance was perceived to be another valuable form of support. In addition, coping strategies in the form of distraction were found to assist some with the challenges of being unemployed and job-seeking.

Finally, participants identified two work-related enabling factors, intrinsically linked to the experience of job-seeking, which they found helpful while job-seeking. Information and skills building in the form of interview performance feedback, potential job leads, and training that imparted job or interview skills was experienced as helpful. Also, job-related support in the form of emotional support or practical assistance from personnel involved in helping young unemployed job-seekers to find work was found to ease the burden of being unemployed and job-seeking.

The personal resources and work-related enabling factors that emerged in the focus groups as being helpful inform the content of potential SMS messages to assist young people to feel supported and motivated while job-seeking. The themes of association with others who care or provide companionship or emotional job-related support map onto SMS messages informed by social support theory; the themes of inspirational words, useful advice, and distraction map onto SMS messages informed by cognitive theory; and the themes of practical assistance, information, and training map onto SMS messages informed by behavioural theory.

Participants’ opinions about receiving resilience-building SMS messages while job-seeking revealed that they preferred short messages, and they tended to endorse and suggest additional messages that contained positive cognitive messages, concrete practical tips, and connectedness-type messages that did not imply that they were conversation starters. In addition, half the participants thought that using inspirational words of wisdom gathered from young people like themselves who had overcome unemployment would motivate and inspire
them. Many participants saved their favourite SMS messages that they received during their focus group, with the intention of rereading them when they felt down or in need of motivation. Messages that appeared to be problematic included those that had an oblique element, or contained negative wording, or were considered to be too confronting.

There did not appear to be gender differences in the views expressed in the focus groups. Although some male participants experienced the sample SMS messages as having a maternal tone, this was perceived to be a positive by participants, and implied that messages do not need to be worded in adolescent language to be effective.

The majority of participants indicated that they would like to be able to request resilience-building SMS messages while job-seeking, particularly when they were experiencing low mood, when they felt vulnerable prior to or after attending a job interview or after being rejected for a job, and when they wanted additional information about material contained in or linked to an SMS message they had received. Participants were receptive to the concept of providing weekly ratings of their mood or other constructs to the researcher. Surprisingly, participants indicated that they would not expect to be reimbursed for any costs they incurred when sending SMS messages to the researcher. However, this may not be the case for all recipients of an intervention because unemployed job-seekers tend to be economically disadvantaged.

Importantly, an SMS messaging intervention should allow participants to specify how often they would like to receive SMS messages, the time of day that they would like to receive messages, the way in which they would like to be addressed in messages (if at all), whether they would like messages to be signed with the sender’s name, and whether they would like messages to include emoticons.

Timing of SMS messages asking participants to rate their mood or another construct needs to be carefully considered, and should be kept constant during any intervention because participants explained that the day of the week on which they received a monitoring SMS
message would colour their rating response. It may be prudent to time monitoring messages for the middle of the week because participants reported that their mood is affected by their expectations of their imminent challenges, and therefore tends to be lighter on Fridays and lower on Sunday nights or Monday mornings.

**Strengths and Limitations**

A strength of the present study is that it targeted vulnerable, chronically unemployed young people from the more disadvantaged and emotionally troubled end of the spectrum. This enabled the views of young people who are least resourceful, and least likely to make use of conventional avenues of support while job-seeking, to be obtained. While this selective sampling has advantages, it also presents a limitation in that it reduces the study’s generalisability to young unemployed job-seekers overall. Young unemployed job-seekers who are not affiliated with BoysTown’s employment initiatives may be less engaged and less receptive to being supported while job-seeking. Generalisability is reduced further by the study’s modest sample size ($N = 16$), and its predominance of males ($n = 12$). In addition, although all focus group members were encouraged to participate, group effects and the influence of dominant group members can bias the information gleaned from focus group discussions. Also, it must be acknowledged that individual biases of the CQR team members may have influenced the outcome of the domains, core ideas, and common themes extracted in the CQR analysis.

**Conclusion**

The focus groups provided useful information about the receptivity of young unemployed job-seekers to resilience-building support using SMS messages. Focus group participants had been unemployed for many months and experienced considerable hardship. It was possible to clearly identify and delineate the cognitive, behavioural and social isolation dimensions of their experience, and the influence of these dimensions in the SMS messages they would like to receive. They were amenable to the idea of receiving and requesting regular
SMS messages that would help them to feel supported and motivated while job-seeking, and thought that it would be useful to continue to receive and request SMS messages for a few months after commencing employment. In addition, they reacted favourably to the concept of providing weekly ratings of their mood or other constructs.

In light of the findings of this study, an SMS message intervention appears well-suited to young unemployed job-seekers because the majority of young people, even those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged, are likely to own and use a mobile phone, and to feel comfortable sending and receiving SMS messages. Thus, the adversity associated with unemployment may be alleviated to some extent by using short, personalised SMS messages that can be received and displayed on any mobile phone, and that contain positive cognitive messages, concrete practical tips, and connectedness-type messages to interrupt the feedback loop of depression and social isolation in order to build resilience.
References


Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core ideas</th>
<th>Common themes</th>
<th>Participant frequency</th>
<th>Focus group frequency</th>
<th>Illustrative quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of skills, qualifications and experience</td>
<td>Lack of qualifications</td>
<td>Variant (31.25%)</td>
<td>General</td>
<td>“That’s why I’m here at BoysTown. You know, to do a course or something to help me with my future so that I have a certificate. That looks better that way.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of qualifications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Feeling like you can’t apply for things because you don’t have the qualifications.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of qualifications</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“If you don’t have a licence you’ve got no chance.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of interview skills</td>
<td>Variant (31.25%)</td>
<td>Typical</td>
<td>“I hate looking at people. And I never know when too much is too much.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of interview skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“If you ain’t got at least one or two years behind you no-one wants you.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of interview skills</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I thought I had one and then I get the call back saying no just because I don’t have enough experience. Everything else would have been good but for the experience.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of experience</td>
<td>Variations</td>
<td>Variants (18.75%)</td>
<td>Variants</td>
<td>“If you ain’t got at least one or two years behind you no-one wants you.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practical problems</td>
<td>Financial limitations</td>
<td>Variants (37.25%)</td>
<td>Typical</td>
<td>“Yeah, it’s lack of money too.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial limitations</td>
<td></td>
<td>Typical</td>
<td>“Everything is far away. Like I live nowhere near here and I have to come all the way out here.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Financial limitations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“A car licence.” [not having one makes it really hard]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remoteness</td>
<td>Variants (31.25%)</td>
<td>Typical</td>
<td>“I don’t really focus. Yeah. I get distracted easy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal issues</td>
<td>Stressors</td>
<td>Variants (18.75%)</td>
<td>Typical</td>
<td>“That’s why I’m just trying to do counselling so that you know when I am ready I can just get a job. So I don’t have to quit all the time.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional problems</td>
<td>Variants (12.5%)</td>
<td>Variant</td>
<td>“I don’t really focus. Yeah. I get distracted easy.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being judged or experiencing prejudice</td>
<td>Youth restricts jobs available</td>
<td>Variants (12.5%)</td>
<td>Variant</td>
<td>“No-one wants to give the young fellow a chance these days.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appearance impacts negatively on interview impression</td>
<td>Variants (6.25%)</td>
<td>Variant</td>
<td>“I don’t like wearing fancy clothes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Appearance impacts negatively on interview impression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“They always judge me because I have crappy tattoos.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

*Domain 2: Emotional Impact of Job-seeking Experienced by Participants, Extracted to Inform Resilience-building SMS Message Content*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core ideas</th>
<th>Common themes</th>
<th>Participant frequency</th>
<th>Focus group frequency</th>
<th>Illustrative quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frustration</strong></td>
<td>Resentment and envy</td>
<td>Variant (25%)</td>
<td>Typical</td>
<td>“Yeah, it’s lack of money too. You see everybody else having fun and you can’t.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Burden of system compliance</td>
<td>Variant (25%)</td>
<td>Variant</td>
<td>“Like I live nowhere near here and I have to come all the way out here.” [to satisfy the Centrelink compliance system]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wasted effort</td>
<td>Variant (12.5%)</td>
<td>Typical</td>
<td>“Everything is far away.” “People just want to waste your time and that.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anger</td>
<td>Variant (12.5%)</td>
<td>Typical</td>
<td>“Punching something.” “… taking your anger out on something.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lowered mood</strong></td>
<td>Feeling rejected</td>
<td>Variant (31.25%)</td>
<td>Typical</td>
<td>“It sucks getting rejected.” “I got some rejections when I went for interviews and you know I just felt like crap.” “It’s just been really hard to get rejection after rejection. So, it takes its toll.” “It’s just real sad.” “I’ve just been for a job interview and they tell me straight away I haven’t got it and I feel ow, ow”.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feelings of disillusionment</td>
<td>Variant (18.75%)</td>
<td>Typical</td>
<td>“I have had a job before but it didn’t really work out that good for me.” “It was just a big shock… just shut me down.” “They won’t let you know. And then you sit there hanging out, hoping to hear about it for the next week, and you don’t hear anything and then you’re back down in the dumps.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling devalued</td>
<td>Variant (12.5%)</td>
<td>Variant</td>
<td>“Sometimes you have people around you who keep putting you down because you can’t find work.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Isolation</strong></td>
<td>Feeling different to others</td>
<td>Variant (6.25%)</td>
<td>Variant</td>
<td>“Everyone else is working. If you were working too it would all work out.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Curtailled social opportunities</td>
<td>Variant (6.25%)</td>
<td>Variant</td>
<td>“I go like a week without talking to anyone.” “I can’t even go home to see everyone when they’re home because I don’t have a job.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3

*Domain 3: Personal Resources Participants found Helpful when Job-seeking, Extracted to Inform Resilience-building SMS Message Content*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core ideas</th>
<th>Common themes</th>
<th>Participant Frequency</th>
<th>Focus group frequency</th>
<th>Illustrative quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Connectedness | Somebody cares    | Variant (25%)         | Typical               | “I’ve been thinking about how like loved I felt when the lady from church texted me …. She said she was praying for me and I thought like wow! It made me feel really happy.”  
“My mum. She’s really supportive of me.”  
“My cousin sometimes.”                                                                                                                                                           |
|             | Companionship     | Variant (18.75%)      | Typical               | “We just sit down and have a couple of drinks, have a talk, and normally I’m all good by the end.”                                                   
“They don’t need to do much. Just be there really.”  
“He just trying to say something funny to make me happy….so if it makes you laugh it works.”                                                                                   |
| Encouragement | Inspirational words | Variant (18.75%)      | Typical               | “My mum tries to inspire me.”  
“My little brother… like it’s not the end of the world yet.”  
“I remember when I had a job and I was so stressed I just wanted to like give up right then and there and just go home….I texted my Mum. And she texted me back and told me to just hang in there ….She said, “You can do it”. And that helped.”  
“Family just try to give some advice.”  
“My brother gives me good advice. He just tells me to go forward. Don’t go back.”                                                                                                 |
| Useful advice  | Variant (12.5%)   | Variant               |                       | “They might feed me or something like that.”                                                                                                        |
| Practical assistance | Variant (6.25%) | Variant               |                       |                                                                                                                                                        |
| Coping strategies | Distraction       | Variant (25%)         | Variant               | “Music.” [helps when feeling down]  
[playing] “Angry Birds.”                                                                                                                                                           |
### Table 4

*Domain 4: Work-related Enabling Factors Participants found Helpful while Job-seeking, Extracted to Inform Resilience-building SMS Message Content*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core ideas</th>
<th>Common themes</th>
<th>Participant Frequency</th>
<th>Focus group frequency</th>
<th>Illustrative quotes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Information and skills building | Information    | Variant (18.75%)     | Typical               | “I say what did I do wrong, and they [potential employers] say you looked at the ground too much, so I try to fix that up.”  
“Certain of my mates have been trying to get me work for years.”  
“They’ll look out for me if like anything comes up.”  
“That’s why I’m here at BoysTown. You know, to do a course or something to help me with my future so that I have a certificate.”  
“Family ….they just help me out with all the interview questions and stuff. Like they say it them all for me.”  
“And a Youth Worker… they give me some coping things.”  
“Caseworkers. They support me in a big way….courses and whatever.” |
|                           | Training       | Variant (18.75%)     | Typical               | “I’ve got like five people in BoysTown that I can talk to whenever I want to.”  
“Sometimes just there being someone to talk to – that can be useful.”  
“And a youth worker, she’ll just help …. make it easier for me.”[problem solving queried] “Yeah.”  
“And my counsellor tries to you know tries to help me get through it and all that. You know, finds stuff we can do to make it easier for me.”  
“They [caseworkers] make my appointments for me.”  
“And a Youth Worker… they give me some coping things.” |
<p>| Job-related support       | Emotional      | Variant (12.5%)      | Typical               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |
|                           | Practical      | Variant (12.5%)      | Typical               |                                                                                                                                                                                                                  |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informing theory</th>
<th>Sample SMS message</th>
<th>Approval rating across groups (%)</th>
<th>Reasons for not endorsing message</th>
<th>Suggested enhanced message</th>
<th>Associated approval rating from suggesting focus group (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Bad things happen but it doesn’t make it your fault</td>
<td>62.5</td>
<td>“It sounds like someone died and you were the witness.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It’s not what happens; it’s what you think about it that affects your feelings.</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remember you can learn something from each unsuccessful job interview/application</td>
<td>37.5</td>
<td>“I don’t like the word unsuccessful.”</td>
<td>Remember you can learn something from each job interview/application</td>
<td>37.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Somewhere inside you is something that will get you a job</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>“Is there something inside me?” “I don’t know if I’d like to receive that in a text message. It’d probably creep me out.”</td>
<td>You’ve got what it takes to get a job</td>
<td>12.5 33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural</td>
<td>The more employers you contact, the greater your chance of getting a job</td>
<td>81.25</td>
<td></td>
<td>Make a list of things you want to discuss with your Enterprises Trainer</td>
<td>16.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Make a list of things you want to discuss with your BoysTown consultant</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Check that your interview clothes are clean and wrinkle-free</td>
<td>43.75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ask a friend what they think you are good at</td>
<td>31.25</td>
<td>“They might not say something good back.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Put a great photo of yourself in your resume</td>
<td>18.75</td>
<td>“We have been told not to put our photo in our resume”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informing theory</td>
<td>Sample SMS message</td>
<td>Approval rating across groups (%)</td>
<td>Reasons for not endorsing message</td>
<td>Suggested enhanced message</td>
<td>Associated approval rating from suggesting focus group(s) (%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>Have a good day</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hope things are going well with you</td>
<td>43.75</td>
<td>“It makes me think that a conversation is starting.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>G’day / Hey</td>
<td>31.25</td>
<td>“I don’t think anyone would want to hear from me.”</td>
<td>Who can you call for a chat?</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who would appreciate a call from you?</td>
<td>18.75</td>
<td>“I don’t think anyone is missing me.”</td>
<td>Call a mate</td>
<td>33.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Who is missing you right now?</td>
<td>18.75</td>
<td>“It makes me feel worse.”</td>
<td>Remember that you are not alone – lots of Australians your age are unemployed and looking for work</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Remember that you are not alone – about 12% of Australians your age are unemployed and looking for work</td>
<td>18.75</td>
<td>“It’s like I’m part of a small group that’s unemployed.”</td>
<td>Remember that you are not alone – lots of Australians your age are unemployed and looking for work</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monitoring</td>
<td>Text us the number that matches your mood, where 1 means very sad, 2 means sad, 3 means normal, 4 means happy, and 5 means very happy</td>
<td>50</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Using Mobile Phones to Promote Resilience

## Table 6

**Suggestions from Focus Group Participants for Additional SMS Messages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informing theory</th>
<th>Occasion for sending SMS</th>
<th>Sample message</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cognitive</td>
<td>Prior to job interview</td>
<td>If it doesn’t go the way you planned, don’t give up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>If it doesn’t go well today, it could go better tomorrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After being rejected for a job</td>
<td>Keep trying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>application/ interview</td>
<td>Something will come up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anytime</td>
<td>If I could do it, you can do it</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(words of wisdom from person who got a job)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavioural</td>
<td>Prior to job interview</td>
<td>Remember to look them in the eye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After a job interview</td>
<td>Make a list of things you learned from the interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anytime</td>
<td>Give yourself a pat on the back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Relieve your stress by doing something you enjoy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social support</td>
<td>Prior to job interview</td>
<td>Good luck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Be yourself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t stress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Don’t be nervous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>You’ll be OK/fine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Have fun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>After a job interview</td>
<td>Be happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anytime</td>
<td>Hope you have a nice day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I believe in you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>I’ll keep an eye out for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hope you’re good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>YOLO (you only live once)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>The joke for today is …..</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>When starting a job</td>
<td>I’m proud of you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>You’re doing well</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>