

INTERNET – MEDIATED COMMUNICATION: IM ONLINE

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ABSTRACT

A vital technology for this generation is instant messaging—or “IM,” for short. IM is one of the simplest forms of synchronous online communications available. It allows two, and sometimes more, computer users to communicate across a network connection. For the most part, the communication is text-based, although many IM networks currently provide facilities to allow for audio and even video. IM is thus an ideal technology for today’s students. Research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) has thus far largely overlooked instant messaging (IM), an extremely popular, and increasingly important, form of CMC. This study examines the most prevalent motivations for using IM within what is currently among the largest demographic groups utilizing this tool, college students. Data from 300 students are used to assess current motivations for IM use, its relative (dis)advantages over other communication channels, and its potential displacement of other technologies

Keywords: Instant Messaging, Internet - Mediated Communication, IMC, Electronic Technology, New Technology.

I. INTRODUCTION

“See you online,” said one teenage student to another as they left school for the day, each headed for her respective home—and connection to the Internet. By “online,” the speaker meant Instant Messaging (IM), through which a rapidly growing number of American teenagers communicate with one another (Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001). Much has been written in the popular press (e.g., Helderman, 2003; Lee, 2002) about teenage use of IM. Although there are a handful of empirically based studies of teenage IM (e.g., Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, & Shklovski, in press; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Randall, 2002; Schiano et al., 2002), there is almost no research on the linguistic characteristics of these conversations (Jacobs, 2003, is an exception). Instant messaging is one form of the larger online phenomenon of Internet-mediated communication (IMC). The term IMC refers to a cluster of interpersonal communication systems used for conveying written text, generally over the Internet. The two major parameters across which types of IMC most significantly differ are first,

whether they are synchronous or asynchronous (i.e., whether or not transmission is essentially instantaneous and interlocutors are assumed to be physically present to read messages and respond to them) and second, whether the communication is one-to-one (i.e., between two people) or one-to-many (i.e., one person's message is broadcast to multiple potential interlocutors).

II. LITERATURE SURVEY

Technologically, IM is a synchronous form of one-to-one CMC. Although only two people are engaged in each conversation, users may conduct multiple IM conversations simultaneously or IM while using their computers for other functions (e.g., word processing, Web searches, commercial transactions) at the same time, not to mention engaging in simultaneous offline activities (e.g., talking, watching television, eating). Therefore, it is common for interlocutors not to have one another's undivided attention, as they might better command in face-to-face conversations. However, the potential recipient does not see any of the actual message until it has been sent. As a form of conversation between two individuals, IM exchanges can, in principle, be viewed in terms of the same kinds of linguistic variables as used in analyzing spoken face-to-face discourse between two interlocutors (see Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson, 1974; Schegloff and Sacks, 1973; Schiffrin, Tannen, and Hamilton, 2001, for discussion of the analysis of spoken language discourse). Although only two people are engaged in each conversation, users may conduct multiple IM conversations simultaneously or IM while using their computers for other functions (e.g., word processing, Web searches, commercial transactions) at the same time, not to mention engaging in simultaneous offline activities (e.g., talking, watching television, eating). Therefore, it is common for interlocutors not to have one another's undivided attention, as they might better command in face-to-face conversations. IM is used to fulfill a wide variety of needs, such as to keep in touch with others who live far away or whom you do not have sufficient time to see in person, to give and receive information, and because it makes communication fast, easy, and convenient (Ramirez, Dimmick, & Lin, 2004). In addition, various forms of identity manipulation in IM have been used for self-exploration, as an aid to overcome shyness, and to facilitate the formation of social relationships (Peter, Schouten, & Valkenburg, 2004). Finally, IM is used to express affection, to be fashionable, and for entertainment, relaxation, inclusion, sociability, and escape (Leung, 2001). Given these myriad applications, theoretical perspectives capable of assessing a diversity of uses need to be invoked to understand IM usage behaviors.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION(S)

This research addresses the following questions related to Instant Message usage among students:

- What are the primary needs fulfilled by IM among college students?
- Has instant messaging displaced the use of other media?

IV. OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

- To understand the primary needs fulfilled by an IM.
- To assess IM's influence on relevant media use patterns.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Participants were college students (N / 300) solicited from undergraduate communication courses who were given course credit for their participation. Participants were not pre-screened based on their technology use and 270 (90%) respondents indicated they use instant messaging. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 27 years (M / 19.48, SD / 1.40), with 85% between 18 and 20 years. Data were collected via a web-based questionnaire. Respondents were asked to complete a questionnaire designed to assess their usage of five different communications technologies for satisfying 26 needs. Communication technologies represented channels examined in past studies that might be viewed as functional alternatives, that are relatively widespread among the target population, and that represent both traditional and contemporary channels, including email, face-to-face communication, landline telephone, cell phone, and instant messaging. Twenty-six individual needs viewed as relevant across all channels (as delineated in the Results section) were derived from extant research on uses and gratifications of contemporary media (Ebersole, 2000; Flanagin & Metzger, 2001). For each of the five channels, respondents were asked how often they used the technology to fulfill each of the listed needs, on a five-point Likert-type scale, where 1 / “never” to 5 / “always.” Respondents were also given the opportunity to skip sections if they “never used” the technology in question.

VI. RESULTS & FINDINGS FOR QUESTION 1

To assess the primary needs fulfilled by instant messaging (Q1), all items used to analyze the needs met by instant messaging were subjected to a principal axis factor analysis, using promax (oblique) rotation. Factors with eigenvalues greater than 1 were retained. Four factors were derived in this manner, explaining almost 67% of the variance overall: “Social Entertainment” (to communicate easily, to do something convenient, to do something fun, to stay in touch, to be entertained, to find out interesting things, to pass time when bored, to get to know others, to provide information, to do something exciting, to do something with others, and to play; 54% variance explained); “Task Accomplishment” (to learn how to do things, to solve problems, to gain insight into self and others, to generate ideas, to negotiate or bargain, to make decisions, to get people to do something for me, to impress people, and to learn about self and others; 7% variance explained); “Social Attention” (to feel less lonely, to feel important, and to relax; 3% variance explained); and “Meet New People” (to talk to people around the world and to meet new people; 3% variance explained). To provide additional information for the assessment of Q1, individual communication satisfaction scores were compared by repeated-measures univariate analyses of variance across communication channels (the within-subjects factor).

VII. RESULTS & FINDINGS FOR QUESTION 2

Data to assess Research Question 2 showed mixed evidence for media displacement coinciding with IM use. Since using instant messaging, 71% reported using landline telephones less (27% same, 2% more) and 38% reported using email less, although 47% reported using email about the same amount (15% more). Face-to-face communication was used about the same amount by 74% of respondents, and cell phones were used less by

24%, the same by 53%, and more by 23%. T-tests comparing usage means against the scale midpoint of two indicated that both email ($t(516) / 5.36, p = 0.001$) and landline telephones ($t(461) / 22.30, p = 0.001$) were used significantly less than they were prior to IM usage.

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