

# The Mercury Project for Instant Messaging Studies



## College Students and Instant Messaging: An Analysis of Chatting, Flirting, & Using Away Messages

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### INTRODUCTION

College communities across the United States are becoming progressively more technological. At Stanford University technology integrates with traditional academics and residential life. All campus residences provide an ethernet connection, and in some cases wireless access, for each student. Students use such access for email, web surfing, file sharing, and Instant Messaging (IM), the chosen method of social communication. IM perks, such as buddy lists, sound, buddy icons, emoticons, profiles, file-transfers, and away messages, attract college students. With over 60 million habitual users (LaGessee, 2001, p. 54), IM allows people to converse with one another without the time lag associated with email communication. According to Steve Jones in his study published as part of the *Pew Internet & American Life Project*, "College Internet users are twice as likely to use instant messaging on any given day compared to the average Internet user. On a typical day, 26% of college students use IM" (2002, p. 2). Since it has become an integral part of college life, IM is affecting residential communities; whether for better or for worse, however, is the subject of heated debate.

I will argue that IM supplements traditional forms of communication and, therefore, is for the better. By extending the real space community into the world of cyberspace, IM strengthens the bonds between peers. Rather than promote social loneliness and isolation, IM fosters more frequent communication between students, building stronger relationships that might not otherwise exist. Some

psychologists and leading Internet researchers, however, fear that online interaction detracts from face-to-face interaction and weakens community ties. For instance, LaGesse presents the common worry that “friends and coworkers are losing the warmth of personal interaction, and IM-ing will cause us to further neglect the power of personal cues—the winks, nods, and voice tones that give nuance to our dialogue” (2001, p. 56). Whether beneficial or harmful, IM is nonetheless a ubiquitous aspect of student life.

To determine whether IM is detrimental or advantageous, three other Stanford freshmen and I created a survey and distributed it to undergraduate students across campus. With the data collected from 120 participants and current research on IM, I will dissect three main uses of IM— chatting, flirting, and leaving and retrieving messages—and analyze their effects on student life. With IM as either their primary or secondary mode of interaction, contemporary students live in a world of constant connection with one another. By supplementing traditional forms of communication, online interaction further facilitates the formation and maintenance of relationships and community cohesiveness.

### **IM & GENERAL CHATTING**

Although IM may seem an idle pastime, it supplements face-to-face interaction by providing another mode of communication. In his study published in *New Media & Society*, Louis Leung found that students chatted on ICQ, an early IM program, “when they had nothing to do (40.3%); [as] a habit (22.8%); when they were bored (18.2%); and when they were alerted by ICQ software (13.3%)” (2001, p. 493). Such statistics portray students’ use of IM as a mindless form of entertainment. Patricia Cooper also portrays IM negatively in her article from *The Cavalier Daily*, commenting that students “procrastinate by chatting with college friends – even those who live within walking distance” (2003, ¶ 3). Although it is true that IM can be used to curb boredom and to procrastinate, many IM conversations foster close relationships between students by increasing the frequency of interaction.

Our survey found that students chat most often with friends on campus, either from their own residence (19.3%) or other dorms (65.7%). The subjects of conversation on IM can range from trivial gossip about daily activities to serious and heavy discussions on racism or politics. Although students use IM to communicate with each other about virtually all aspects of their lives, gossiping (66.7%), ranting (45.0%), and planning social events (38.7%) are most common. Students also use IM to communicate with distant friends and occasionally family members. Therefore, IM is a useful tool for social communication, an activity, which strengthens relationships.

Obviously, each student has his/her own individual motives for using IM, but many basic trends exist. One significant motive is the convenience of IM. Instead of having to physically visit friends or call them on the telephone, IM users can simply send a quick message and expect a timely response. As Rebecca Grinter and Leysia Palen found in their study on IM, “college teens reported using IM to communicate with roommates and housemates rather than meeting face-to-face or overtly disrupting them” (2002, p. 27). When I want to ask doormmates a quick question or to see if they are up for a game of foosball, I use IM as an intercom system. It is less intrusive than a phone call and quicker and easier than face-to-face interaction. For such reasons, IM has become an important aspect of student life. Participants in Rebecca Grinter and Leysia Palen’s study “reported being annoyed by IM non-users and complained of the inconvenience and additional work required to contact them” (2002, p. 23). People who do not use IM often feel pressure from their peers to begin using it. As Barry Wellman and others suggest in a study of “social capital” and Internet use, “online interactions fill communication gaps between face-to-face meetings” (2001, p. 438). This ability to complement real space interaction, makes IM an excellent tool for establishing community by placing students in constant connection with one another.

Our survey reveals the benefits of such substantial contact; 89.9% of students agree that it is easy to keep in touch with friends using IM while only 34.3% agree that is easy to keep in touch

without IM. From these statistics, it is apparent that without IM the college community would be less cohesive. Perhaps, IM is effective because of its high market saturation, which places almost anyone, as long as they have a screen name, at the users' fingertips. Although it is not impossible to stay in touch and communicate without IM, it mimics random face-to-face encounter but with enormously increased odds. Imagine bumping into your acquaintances in a coffee shop and consider how the frequency of such meetings would affect the intimacy of your relationships. IM is like a coffee shop, a place to meet and chat with people. Yet, since IM's location is amorphous you and your friends are more likely to be there every time you sign on. This increased availability of causal conversation is a crucial aspect that allows IM to promote closer relationships.

The ability to multitask and to simultaneously converse with numerous friends is also a benefit of IM. In Grinter and Palen's study, "all participants reported that they regularly used IM while engaging in some other computer-based activity, such as completing schoolwork, web surfing and emailing. Multitasking across several applications is a common feature of use across populations of users" (2002, p. 25). Additionally, college students often talk on the telephone, listen to music, talk to people in person, read, do homework, or eat while also chatting online. Since most students are able to multitask, IM does not detract from other aspects of their lives. While they go about their real space activities, they simultaneously remain connected, through their computers, to numerous friends and acquaintances.

Despite the many benefits of IM, there are several drawbacks. Sarcasm and seriousness can often be misinterpreted. To address this problem, IM applications have incorporated means of reducing such ambiguity. According to Neil Randal, in his study of Canadian youth, "Emoticons and other indicators of emotion or reaction are attempts to represent the body, while informal use of punctuation, grammar and diction are attempts to represent the spoken word" (2002, p. 5). Following a potentially harsh comment with a winky or smiley face or the slang "j/k," short for just kidding, reduces the risk of

misinterpretation. In addition, a higher level of intimacy between two people greatly decreases the possibility of miscommunication. Being aware of how someone communicates in real space can help a user interpret the meaning behind that person's online comments. Another disadvantage of IM is that it is a large distraction from arguably more productive activities. Further, some critics claim that students have too great a dependency on IM. However, Randall found that "when something is to be celebrated, or something important but negative needs to be communicated, then people clearly believe talking to the person is better than writing them" (2002, p. 35). Therefore, it appears that users understand the limitations of IM and do not let it completely dictate their method of communication. Rather, they use it when convenient and appropriate. Since IM does not replace or hinder students' real world activities, it only strengthens face-to-face relationships. IM connects students to a vast social network and encourages interaction in an easy and convenient environment.

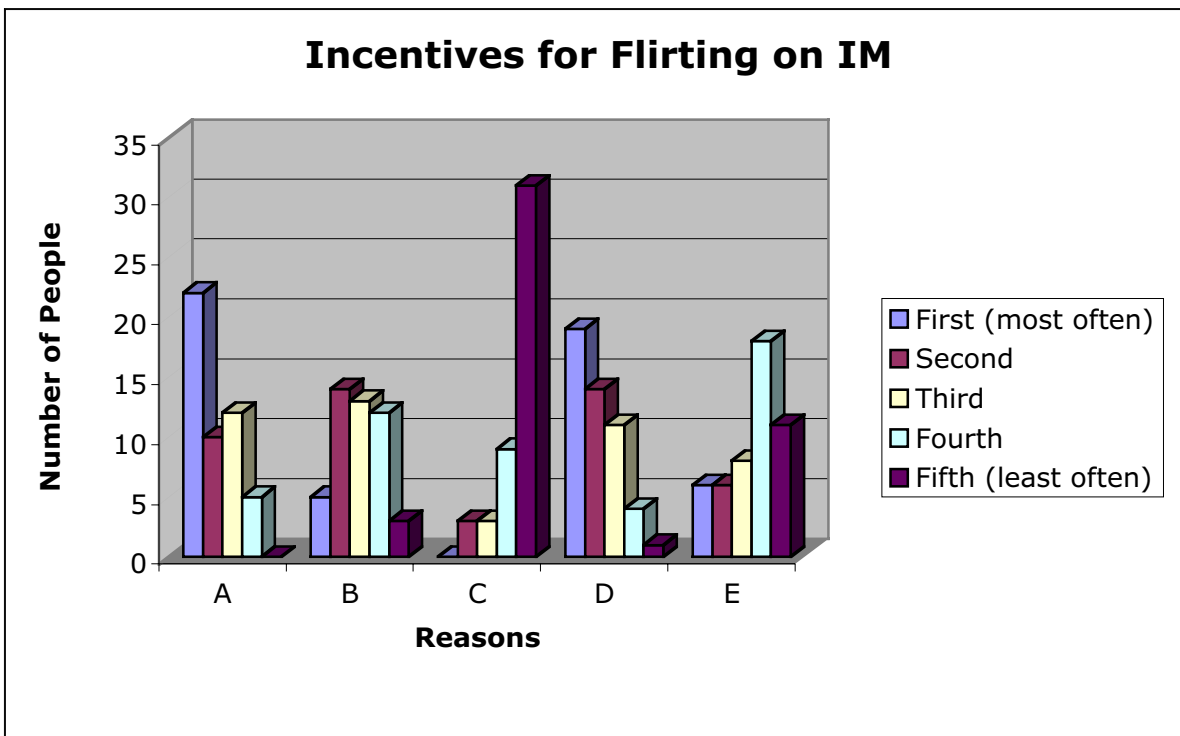
#### **IM & FLIRTING**

Flirting on IM is marked by certain benefits not available during face-to-face interaction. Such features distinguish IM's ability to increase the intimacy of social relationships. Michelle Marco, a senior at Stanford and frequent online flirter, discusses the benefits of online flirting in an interview:

The exciting thing about interpersonal relationships on AIM is that it is a bit more impersonal, so you can say things that you wouldn't normally say when flirting with a person face-to-face. That way, I don't need to deal with an embarrassing awkward pause in the conversation, or make eye contact after saying something especially risqué. I can be wittier or saucier on AIM than in person. Also, one can take the time to anticipate how the other person will react when trying to decide what to say to them. The lack of tone/emotion in text conversations also allows you to be bolder in your statements, and also write off any uncomfortable situations by saying, "Oh, I was being sarcastic" or something similar (May 13, 2003).

Other benefits of flirting on IM are the decreased level of pressure, increased confidence level, and increased ability to be oneself. Our survey reveals that the two most common reasons why students flirt on IM are the ability to think before speaking (44.9%) and the decreased stress and pressure associated

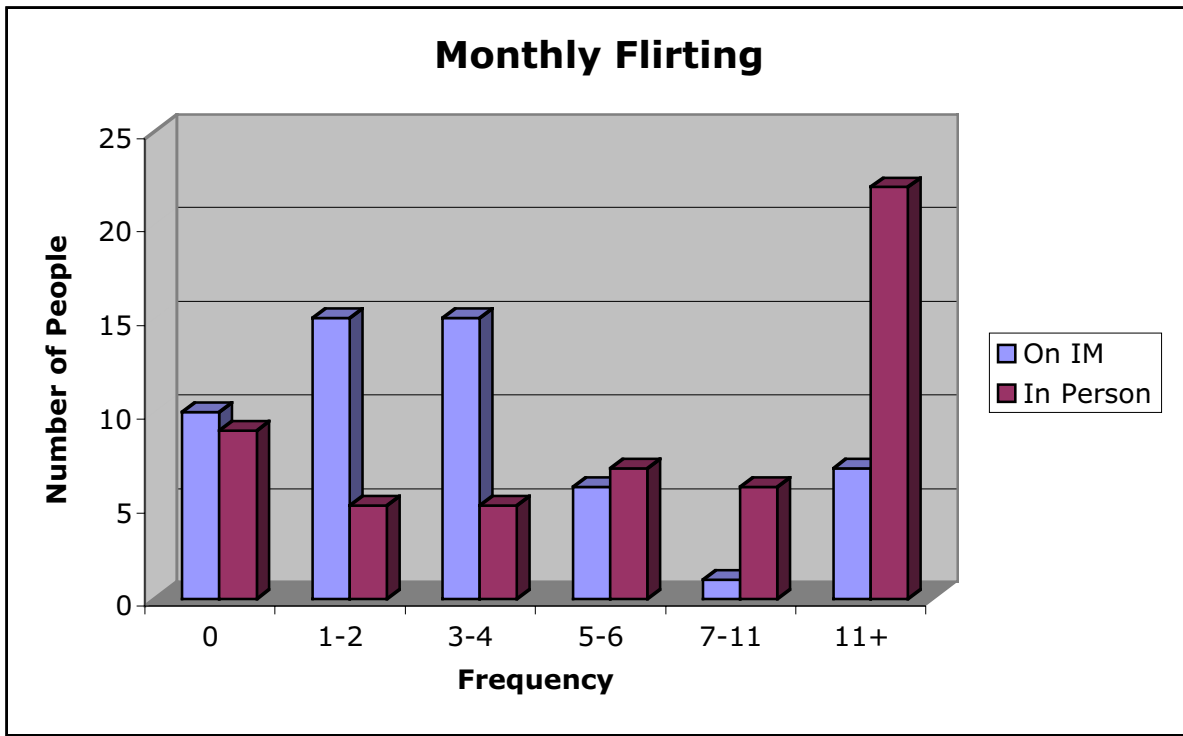
with flirting (38.8%). Such benefits and emotions are all associated with the reduction of social discomfort present during face-to-face interaction.



A – I can think before I say something, B- There are fewer awkward pauses,  
 C – I can use my friends for advice about what to say,  
 D – There is less pressure/it is less stressful, E – I feel that I can be myself easily

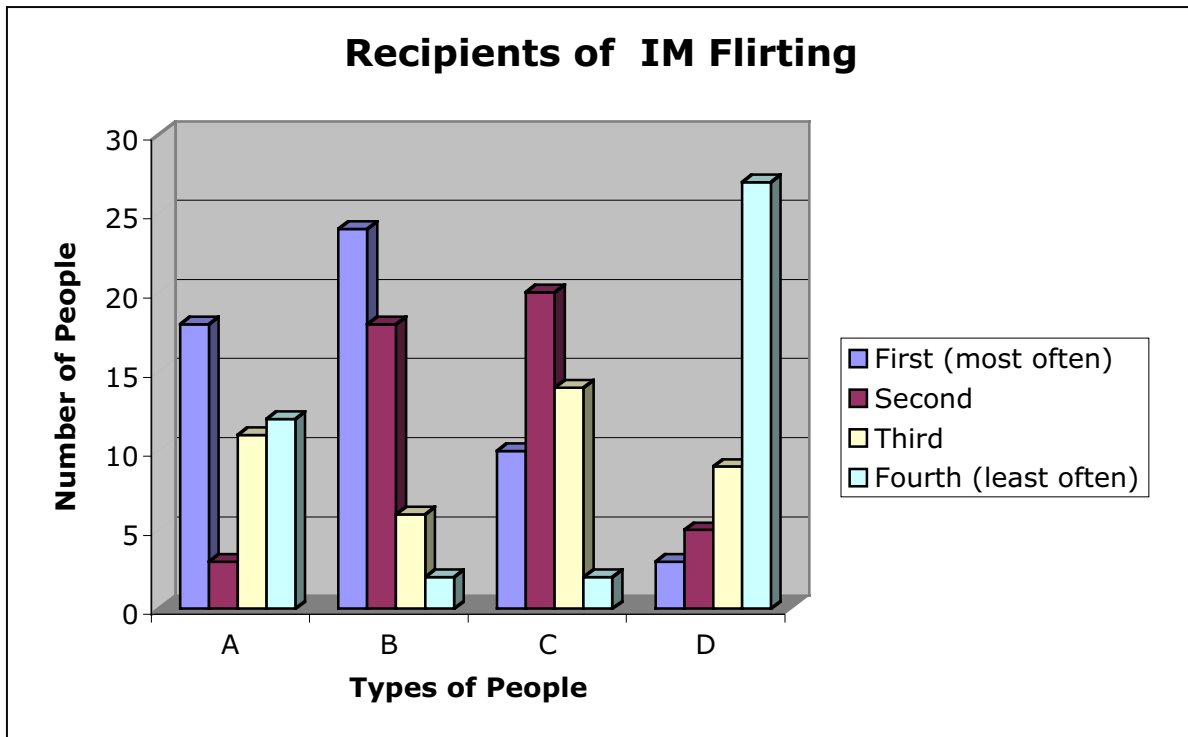
Since flirting online often involves the anticipation of a future face-to-face meeting, getting to know each other online can hurry along the real world romantic process. While, IM fosters socialization, online flirting does not involve physical interaction and is possibly not as exciting as an actual encounter. Perhaps this factor determines why 94.3% of Stanford students say that flirting in person is more effective than on IM. Interestingly, Randal found that “32% of the 16-19 group flirt more often online than offline, in comparison to the 21% of the 20-34 group” (2002, p. 37). At Stanford only 14.8% of students prefer to flirt online; however, 50.9% say that they do flirt on IM even though they prefer to flirt in person. On average, Stanford students flirt on IM three to four times a month and in person seven to eleven times a month. Although online flirting may not be as popular as

face-to-face flirting, it nonetheless promotes intimacy and increases the chances of developing relationships.



From the psychological perspective, flirting on IM is a goal driven activity. In her article, “Networked Seduction,” Fabrizia Mantovanti discusses the implications of online flirting. She concludes that “seduction can be defined as a strategic and intentional behavior, primarily induced by the attraction (usually sexual) to another person (usually of opposite gender): its main goal is the engagement and its outcome is the reduction of interpersonal distance in view of a relation of intimacy” (2001, p. 148). Although Montovanti’s definition is, perhaps, too scientific, it describes online flirting as a means of promoting social relations. She also argues that flirting is either the result of targeting an individual or the reaction to being targeted. This distinction helps explain the trends of Stanford flirting preferences. Students flirt most often with platonic friends (48.0%) and second most often with boyfriends and girlfriends (40.9%). An astounding 61.4% marked that they flirt least often with

someone they are interested in but hardly know. Since flirting online is so targeted, it seems that students prefer to flirt with peers with whom they already have a safe relationship.



A – My boyfriend/girlfriend, B – Friends with no intention of romance,  
 C – A friend with the intent of future romance,  
 D – An acquaintance with the intent of romance

Since IM offers certain features not available during face-to-face flirting, it is a beneficial social tool. The ability to control what is said and more easily manipulate the conversation allows students to promote their best image. As Mantovani suggests, the signals of online flirting are different from face-to-face flirting: “The absence of nonverbal cues makes the process of first impression formation take on new form. ... the actors rely on different cues, such as language, style, timing and speed of writing, use of punctuation, use of emoticons, and so forth” (2001, p. 149). For instance, IM offers shy people, who find it difficult to flirt, a form of expression perhaps more suitable to their personality. Further, in the absence of visual presence, physical appearance is downplayed and personality becomes more important (Mantovani, 2001, p. 150). Through a comfortable environment, IM promotes social



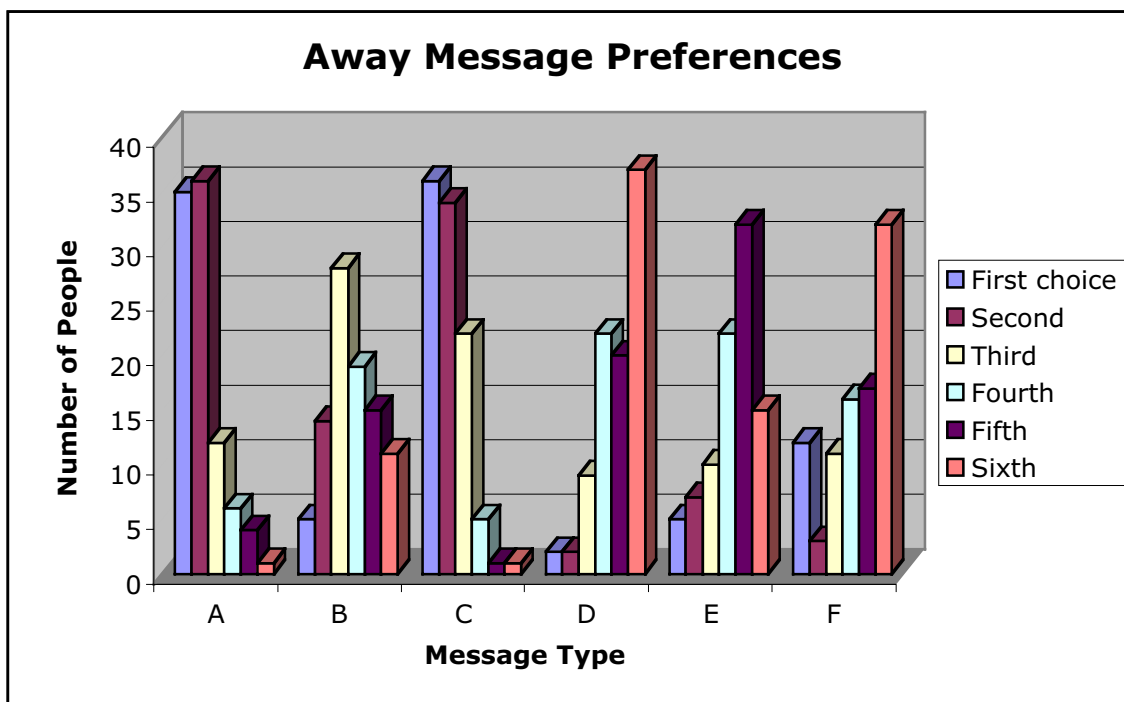
intimacy, either supplementing face-to-face romance or initiating romantic relationships that might not otherwise occur.

### **AWAY MESSAGES & IM**

The away message, arguably one of the most useful aspects of IM, acts as a quasi-voicemail system, spreading important information and thereby producing a connected community. With the away message option, college students are able to simultaneously leave and receive messages. Since students change their outgoing information frequently, these messages are often quite informative. Imagine calling someone on the telephone and having their answering machine tell you where they are, what they are doing, and when they will return. Such specific information is highly useful. An astounding 92.9% of Stanford students leave away messages and 39.4% say that they “often” check others’ away messages while 25.0% say that they “always” check others’ away messages. (See Appendix A for a graph on the frequency of checking away messages). Since away messages are highly used, they represent an extensive exchange of personal, pertinent information. In turn, this knowledge helps strengthen bonds between students and create a more cohesive community.

There are multiple types of away messages, and, for simplicity, I have divided them into two main types, informational and emotional. Informational messages describe a person’s whereabouts, activities, or estimated time of return. Sometimes they may also be a message to a specific person. An extremely common nighttime message is the sleep message. For instance, Claire Wagenseil, a freshman at Stanford, often writes either “sleeping it off” or “turn off the light cuz its night on the sun” when she goes to bed. Although not always as obviously targeted, the following message illustrates how away messages can be used to address a certain individual: “this is directed to someone i had a shitty conversation with today – do you remember how your favorite quote was...the opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference...i still care, even if you don’t.” Although this informational message is emotionally charged, messages that fall into the emotional category are usually less specific and less

targeted. Such messages include random verbal exclamation, quotes or sayings, rants or complaints, and expressions of celebration. Some such messages are “arg,” “Happy Friday! These are good times,” and “wheeeeeee.” The results from our survey reveal that Stanford students use away messages the most “to say what they are doing” (37.9%), the second most “to let people know where they are” (36.8%), and the least “to leave a specific message for someone” (2.1%). Since the majority of away messages give information regarding activities and whereabouts, away messages provide information useful to connect students with one another. Additionally, IM allows students who are not in constant physical contact to remain close to each other through regularly updated knowledge of activities and emotions. These informational and emotional connections establish closer personal bonds and again help create a more cohesive community.



A -Where I am, B – When I will return, C – What I am doing, D – Message for a specific person, E – Express my emotions, F – Leave a quote or saying

The user’s ability to receive messages while “away” from the computer is an important social benefit of IM. When people return to their computer and the IM icon is flashing at the bottom of their

screen, a feeling of immediacy urges them to check their messages and respond quickly. Since a response does not involve a lengthy discussion, students usually reply right away. By providing information, acting as an answering machine, and allowing ongoing contact, away messages serve as a means of increasing social knowledge and connecting members of the college community.

## **COMMUNITY & IM**

The social effects of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) are widely debated. In his report, "Sociability, Interpersonal Relations, and the Internet," Norman Nie states, "At the heart of this debate is whether Internet use can be a potentially isolating activity or one that leads to substantially greater communication among people and thus enhances human connectivity and sociability" (2001, p. 421). Critics assume that the more time spent online, the less time is available for socialization (Nie and Hillygus, 2002, p. 11). However, they fail to consider what happens when time spent online is primarily focused, as with IM, on socialization. In his study, "Internet Use and Its Relationship to Loneliness," Eric Moody found that

individuals who spend more time online are more likely to have higher rates of emotional loneliness and lower rates of social loneliness based on correlational evidence. This suggests that the impact of the Internet on emotional wellbeing may be more complex than previously thought and cannot be viewed as having solely a negative or beneficial effect (Moody, 2001, p. 395).

By interacting online, Internet users fulfill their need for socialization. However, since they do not interact with people in a face-to-face environment, they may suffer emotional loneliness.

Following Moody's logic, IM use in a college environment has only beneficial effects. IM increases the frequency of student socialization, through chatting, flirting, and using away messages, but since college students live in dorm environments, surrounded by friends and peers, they do not lack face-to-face interaction. Since IM in a college setting is used to supplement, not replace, face-to-face communication, it has primarily beneficial effects on dorm and campus relationships. Therefore, IM strengthens the social bonds created in real space and, once again, fosters a cohesive community.

## CONCLUSION

With a high rate of use on the Stanford campus (93.4%), IM has become an integral aspect of communication and community. While this paper focuses solely on chatting, flirting, and leaving and reading away messages, IM has many other features worth studying: buddy lists, buddy icons, profiles, sound, video feeds, file transfers, and blocking. It would be useful to discern if the generally low level of online flirting at Stanford is representative of college campuses across the nation or, rather, a reflection of the common saying, “There is no dating at Stanford.” Although some away messages at Stanford are more common than others, there is a wide range of subject matter. Perhaps another study could explore a connection between personality type and away message subject matter.

Despite the multiple benefits of IM, there will always be skeptics. As one anonymous survey participant comments, “I rarely use it—I prefer real communication and Internet ‘slang’ annoys me.” The number of non-users, however, is very small. IM is increasingly pushing its way into college life; the social impetus to communicate using IM is enormous. Although most students correspond with their teachers through email, perhaps IM will begin to replace or supplement such interaction. Speaking with a teacher over IM, although a somewhat creepy thought to most students, would have the same effect it does when students communicate with each other, the development of closer relationships. IM has already found its way into some classrooms in the form of real-time, online discussion forums and, most likely, will be increasingly adapted to education.

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**Appendix A**

