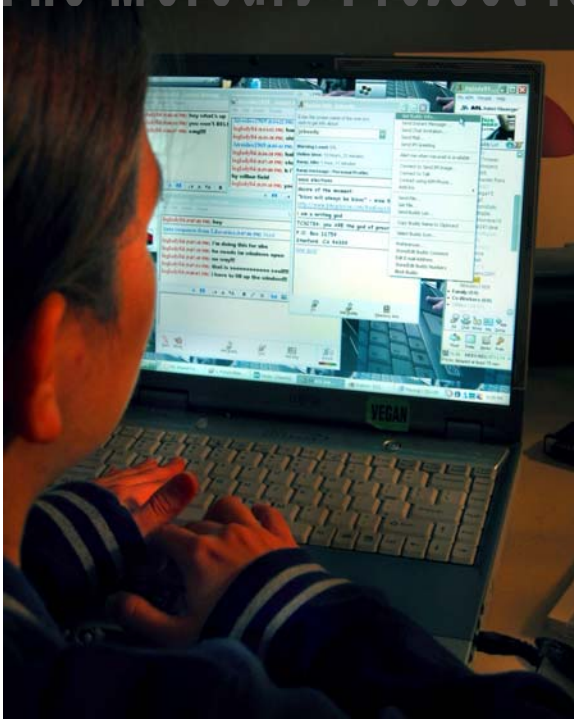


The Mercury Project for Instant Messaging Studies



A Note to Mom: Why I Use IM

By Eric Chu

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the ages mothers and their wisdom dominate the home. In an era of high-speed Internet, mothers set the speed limit. My mother is not very tech-literate, yet I cannot help but heed her wisdom when she suggests that I ought to spend less time on the computer and more time with real people. The Internet, Mom says, does not teach me how to interact with people; it is only a set of meaningless interactions with a computer screen. But is Mom really right? Internet, especially instant messaging and blogging,¹ has helped me connect with long, lost friends. It has helped me keep in touch with my high school friends and has enhanced my friendship with them. Is it, I ask myself, as detrimental as Mom makes it out to be?

While Mom's claims might have some ground, she and many others neglect a feature of the Internet that is rising in popularity among teenagers and college students—instant messaging (IM). Researchers studying the effects of Internet on socialization, such as Norman Nie of Stanford University, like Mom, have suggested that time spent online “displaces” time that could have been spent wisely with other people. On the other hand, researchers such as Barry Wellman of the University of Toronto offer a more optimistic perspective for college students like myself grappling with Mom's wisdom. Wellman concludes that the Internet saves time and

¹ “Blogging” – (v.) to write in an online journal, also known as a “blog,” which is short for “weblog.”

builds relationships. Both researchers, however, agree that future research should be done to determine the social value of Internet communication, of which the most popular form among college students, by far, is instant messaging. I have taken up this challenge and conducted a survey of 120 Stanford undergraduates in order to determine their perception of IM. My study suggests that while Stanford students find Nie's "displacement" theory to be correct, they do not agree with him that IM makes a person socially isolated. Instead, most feel that instant messaging supplements real-life relationships, keeping distant friends together and strengthening those relationships. However, if given a choice between IM and face-to-face interactions, many students would much rather meet their friends in person. IM, then, is a social tool, not a set of "meaningless interactions." Mom, I think, may be wrong this time.

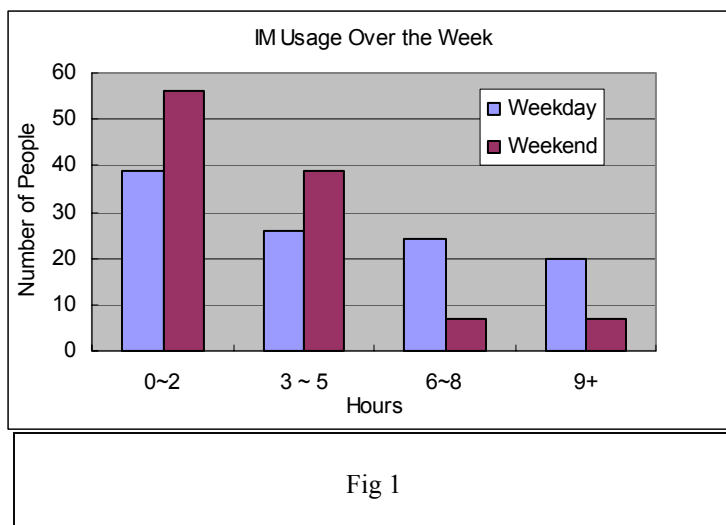
WHY MOM MIGHT BE RIGHT

Because instant messaging requires at least two people in dialogue with each other, it plays a key role in interpersonal relationships and has some sort of social value, yet Mom still has reason to worry. What kind of role does IM play in interpersonal relationships? Does it alienate or bring people together? Barry Wellman et al, in their study of social capital,² introduce several arguments against the idea that the Internet use (of which IM is a part) might play a *positive* role in interpersonal relationships (439). The first is that online interactions are far inferior to face-to-face (henceforth referred to as "f2f") interactions, decreasing the quality of those relationships. The second argument is Nie's "displacement" theory, which states that Internet use, including time spent on IM, detracts from time that could be spent wisely elsewhere. And, finally, that

² Social capital, according to Wellman, et al, is divided into three areas: network capital, participatory capital, and community commitment. Network capital, roughly, refers to relations with friends and family. Participatory capital refers to the level of participation in various organizations. Community commitment is self-explanatory.

high Internet use causes loneliness, isolation, and depression. These reasons give Mom plenty to worry about.

Eric Moody of the Jewish Medical Research Center has conducted a study on the effects of Internet use and loneliness, discovering a sort of Internet paradox. Although communication tools such as e-mail or IM increase the amount of communication with others, he says, they also create a sense of emotional loneliness (Moody 396). His study sample, however, pertains only to



distant friends and relatives. In other words, it is possible that the emotional loneliness from Moody's study results from a lack of f2f interaction, not necessarily from high Internet or IM use. Moody himself writes, "This study's results seem to suggest that by limiting the FtF [face-to-face] component of

social interaction, loneliness or other problems might result [...]" (396). F2f interaction is integral in the lives of Stanford undergraduates, since they interact daily with members of their dorm. They are also conscious that IM might detract from time to interact on a face-to-face level and use it reservedly—less than five hours a week (*see* Fig. 1). With the remaining time on their hands they probably spend in class, with friends, studying in the lounge, reading, or partying. When they find something better to do than IM, they would rather do that and spend less time on IM. These undergraduates do not lack f2f interactions—they are not distant from their friends who also live on campus. Hence, loneliness, depression, and even isolation are probably not a factor in this discussion of users who use IM to communicate with already existing friends.

Because Internet users end up spending more time online and are hence have less time to spend elsewhere, Moody suggests that high Internet use results in emotional loneliness (396). While IM use is not necessarily the cause for emotional loneliness, it is, nonetheless, especially addicting. The Stanford undergrads who choose not to use IM almost always cite a fear of addiction or a fear of being distracted from their work as reasons for not using IM, and their fears are not unfounded. An article from the Texas A&M University Wire gave extreme examples of students who, because of their addiction to IM, lost a boyfriend or girlfriend or suffered academically (McNulty). One of these students resorted to uninstalling her IM system and deleting it in order to free up time to do homework and complete academic tasks. While the article also poses an alternative view of IM in the business world as something that allows getting “as much done in as little time possible” (McNulty), the truth is that IM tends to get as little done in as much time possible. One Stanford freshman who quit using IM in college said that his IM conversations with friends in high school were “meaningless.” Even conversations with an intended purpose run longer than expected. Terence E. Hagans, a Stanford junior and sociology major, expressed a similar sentiment when I asked him why he did not use instant messaging. He said that it just takes too much time, even to say “hello.” “I type in ‘hello’ and then you type in ‘hello’ and then I type in ‘how are you doing?’ and you type back. Then we can’t really end there, and so we start talking! It’s not like walking in the hallway, passing by a friend, saying ‘hi,’ and walking back to your room” (Hagans). In addition, Hagans finds that having the ability to talk to multiple users to be a drawback rather than an advantage of IM: “Imagine 20 friends in the hallway, all trying to talk to you as you walk past them. And you have to respond to every one of them. That’s like having 20 IM windows open” (Hagans). Not only do simple conversations suddenly take more time to conduct, trying to hold multiple conversations in multiple windows requires much more time on the user’s part to respond.

On the opposing side stand studies conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation of the San Jose Mercury News and Barry Wellman. The Kaiser Family Foundation recently conducted a survey of Silicon Valley youth published on May 18th titled Growing Up Wired. From their report, 64% felt that Internet use has helped improve their grades, a substantial 82% felt that Internet did not make a difference in the time they spent with family and friends, while 26% believed that Internet caused them to spend less time on the television (Kaiser). With IM, however, this is clearly not the case. Although 64% believe that Internet has helped improve their grades, instant messaging, like the telephone, has little to no academic value because of its informal nature. The explanation for grade improvement may be attributed to the easy access of information online from sites such as Google. The Kaiser study seems to corroborate Wellman et al.'s belief that "[t]he time people save because they shop online may be spent in offline socializing with family and friends" (450). Instead of shopping online, people might be spending less time on television (because of the Internet) and allocating that time to family and friends, accounting for the majority belief that Internet does not detract from time with family and friends. But what about IM? Most Stanford students believe that using IM is very time-consuming and use it reservedly, a majority of them using it less than 5 hours a week and

even less on the weekend (see Fig 1). Forty-four percent of the surveyed students believed that time spent on IM detracted from time to interact on an f2f level (see Fig 2), reflecting the

	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
IM time detracts from time to interact on a face-to-face level.	44%	24%	31%
IMs are less intimate than face-to-face interactions.	89%	8%	3%
I am more comfortable online than I am in person.	30%	36%	34%
I communicate with my friends off campus more often because of IM.	91%	5%	5%
I communicate with my friends in other residences more often because of IM.	66%	14%	20%
I communicate with my friends in my dorm because of IM.	19%	27%	54%
Without IM, my relationships with friends off campus would be weaker.	68%	17%	15%
It is easy to keep in touch with friends via IM.	90%	8%	2%

Fig 2

time diary³ findings of Nie, and D. Sunshine Hillygus (Nie & Hillygus 11). As an avid user of IM myself, I have had friends message me saying, “Can I call you? It takes too long to talk on IM.” Yet other activities consume time as well, so why should time spent on IM be seen as more detrimental than time spent elsewhere?

Because IMs lack the power and intimacy of f2f interactions, time on IM has the potential to be detrimental:

There was this psych study conducted where psychologists took two baby monkeys and raised one with warm, nurturing hands and the other with something like a cold pole. They found that the one raised with a warm, nurturing presence was ‘normal’ and the other monkey could not function normally. Raising a monkey with the touch of a cold pole is like raising a baby on IM. There’s something about the power of physical intimacy.... (Hagans)

Eighty-nine percent of Stanford students agree⁴ with Hagans that IMs are less intimate than f2f interactions and using IM exclusively to build relationships can have its drawbacks (*see* Fig 2). More importantly, to achieve a conversation with the same depth as an f2f interaction requires more time since IMs are less intimate than f2f interactions. So it seems that Mom has good reason to worry: IM is time-consuming and lacks human warmth. As a result, IM might, instead, play a negative role in interpersonal relationships even among users who already have offline relationships.

SO WHY USE INSTANT MESSAGING? (AKA WHY MOM IS WRONG)

³ Time diaries basically ask subjects to record relatively exact time measurements of certain activities in a day over a period of time as opposed to a survey that asks subjects to estimate the amount of time they spend doing a specific task. Nie et al. argues that time diaries produce accurate data (Nie & Hillygus 4).

⁴ Survey questions asked respondents to mark on a Likert scale whether they agreed with a statement about IM or not. I grouped “strongly agree” and “agree” into one category and “strongly disagree” and “disagree” in another, resulting in the presented table in Fig 2. These figures are rounded.

If IM is less intimate and more time-consuming than f2f interactions, why is it so ubiquitous and why do Stanford undergraduates bother to use it? IM must have some utility, or students would spend their online time offline. Louis Leung from The Chinese University of Hong Kong, who conducted research on college students' motivations for using ICQ,⁵ proposes that college students use IM systems for relaxation, entertainment, fashion, inclusion, affection, sociability, and escape (483). While Leung may be correct, my informal survey of Stanford undergraduates reveals yet another reason for using IM—to keep in touch and maintain valuable friendships that are physically distant.

In my interview with Terence Hagens, he noted some positive aspects about IM. “With distant friendships, IM shows great promise!” (Hagens). The Pew Internet and American Life Project supports Hagan’s statement:

[O]nline social interaction is a supplement rather than a substitute for offline social interactions. [...] This suggests that the Internet [and IM] is allowing students to maintain a connection with their hometown friends, family, and culture, even when those people and interests are thousands of miles away from the student’s campus.
(Pew 17-18)

Nearly 90% of the survey respondents also agreed with Hagens that it is easy to keep in touch with friends via IM (*see* Fig 2). Furthermore, Hagens noted that IM users tended to be freer with language, which could be both something positive and negative. While the freedom allowed by IM might lead to romantic dialogue that might not have occurred in real life, it also allows certain kinds of people to open up online that would never had opened up in a face-to-face interaction. A recent IM conversation with my high school friend, Eva Chen, also a Stanford

⁵ ICQ, developed by Mirabilis (now owned by AOL), is one of the earliest instant messaging programs. It stands for “I seek you.”

University freshman, revealed that she agreed with Terence's sentiment. "i feel like im can also help deepen relationships that you have started [...] like, if you made some friends, it's easier to share deeper things online [...] because it's easier to say" (Chen) (*sic*).⁶ On the other hand, survey respondents were split evenly between agreeing, disagreeing, and feeling neutral about their comfort level online in comparison to on an f2f level (*see* Fig 2). Perhaps it is simply the virtue of the medium, providing a certain psychological removal from the person on the other end, and the ease with which IM allows communication that leads users to be more expressive on IM than in person, whether they feel more comfortable online or not.

Studies conducted at Syracuse University, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), and Saint Louis University further the idea that IM might enhance interpersonal relationships. Scott Nicholson of Syracuse University states that students using IM in a virtual classroom environment felt a stronger sense of community and communicated more often and more easily with other students (Nicholson 371). An article published in 2003 about the transition of friendships from high school to college by Debra Oswald and Eddie Clark of UIUC and Saint Louis University, respectively, revealed that "[i]ndividuals who communicate frequently are more likely to remain best friends and do not report the decrease in satisfaction, commitment, rewards, and increase in costs experienced by low-communication friendships" (Oswald & Clark 194). Since a whopping 91% of Stanford undergraduates replied that they felt that IM helped them communicate more often with friends off campus, it follows that an increase in students' social networks helps friends maintain their friendship and increases the quality of their various friendships (*see* Fig 2). Oswald and Clark also note that "[m]aintaining the best

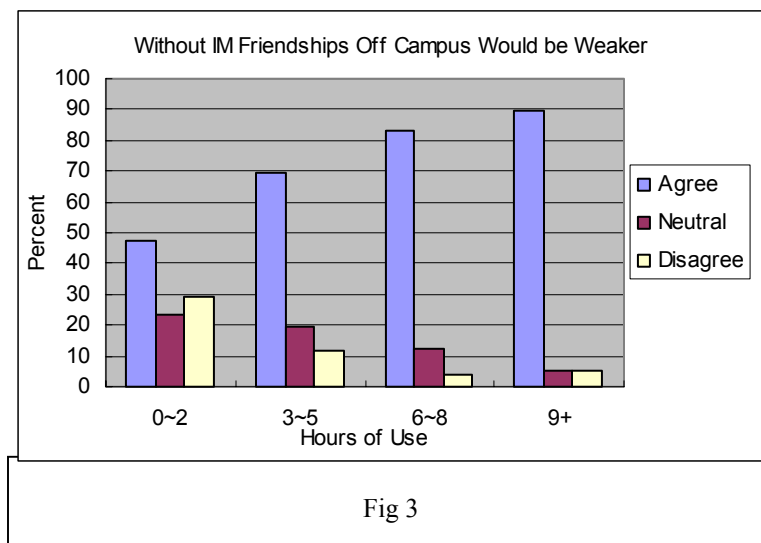
⁶ Instant messages are relatively new sources. I've tried to maintain the original grammar and spelling from my conversation, while deleting the screen names and inserting ellipses in their place resulting in a somewhat awkward-looking quotation. In proper grammar, the quote: "I feel like IM can also help deepen relationships that you have started. Like, if you made some friends, it's easier to share deeper things online because it's easier to say."

friendship also appeared to buffer adolescents from social loneliness” (187). As a result, not only does IM increase communication between friends, allowing them to keep in touch more often, it also serves to decrease loneliness, debunking Moody’s claim that IM use might cause loneliness.

Nonetheless, there are still skeptics who believe that IM does not enhance relationships.

Nie and Erbring, as part of The Stanford Institute for the Quantitative Study of Society (SIQSS), claim that Internet use decreases sociability (Nie & Erbring). Nie and Erbring found that Internet users spent less time interacting with their immediate environment and more on e-mail, “although it is unclear to what extent this represents a shift to e-mail even in communicating with friends and family” (Nie & Erbring). Hence, they allow for the fact that social activities on the Internet, such as IM, *can* compensate for the loss of time in interacting with one’s environment.

In 2002, The Australian ran an emotionally charged article entitled “Feeling more connected? It’s a waste of time” that blatantly discounted IM as a valuable social tool. “The quantity of human interactions is up but the quality has taken a dive” (Tom). The writer believes that the rise of IM can be attributed to our “social cowardice” and an unwillingness to interact



face to face (Tom). Instead, my survey data supports just the opposite: IM usage is a result of a desire to keep social connections and of physical distance, not of social cowardice. Leung suggests in his study of ICQ that “[t]he Internet has turned out to be far more social

than television, [...] since interpersonal communication is the dominant use of the Internet [...]” (497). Ninety-one percent of Stanford undergraduates said that they communicated more often with friends off campus because of IM, and 68% said that IM was a factor in the strength of their friendship, especially those who used IM for more than 9 hours during the week (*see* Fig 2, 3). Fewer (65%) said that they communicated more often with friends on campus because of IM—and, surprisingly, still fewer (19%) said that they communicated with friends in close proximity, such as dormmates, with IM. From the data, it seems that IM use is directly proportional to the distance one’s friends are. The closer one’s friends are the more one desires to see them face to face rather than online. So, students, when given a choice between IM and other activities requiring f2f interaction, would rather choose the f2f interaction. The Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that 71% of Internet users use the telephone to keep in touch with friends, followed by a mere 18% who use IM to keep in touch, indicating a bias towards the more intimate activity of telephoning (Kaiser). A survey respondent who did not use IM wrote, “I don’t enjoy talking to people over the Internet when I can call them or just talk to them.” IM, then, mostly helps to connect people and expand the physical distance to which their networks can reach. It has even helped me come to find my childhood friends—one of whom expressed that it seemed as if we had never lost touch with each other for nearly 13 years as result of our consistent dialogues on IM (Lin). IM helps people in offline relationships that are separated by distance to keep in touch, but when it comes to friends in a closer proximity, f2f interaction is preferred.

In the previous section, I noted that IM consumed much time and lacked human warmth, causing many mothers to worry that their children would become socially isolated. Despite the fact that IM requires more time in order to cultivate a relationship with the same depth as f2f interaction, many IM users, and Stanford students in particular, use IM to increase the depth already established by f2f interaction and to keep in touch with an old fling from summer school,

best friends from elementary school, or a high school buddy across the country. In essence, Stanford undergraduates perceive that IM has a positive social value in maintaining and improving interpersonal relationships. For some students, this value outweighs the time required to use IM, leading them to use IM to maintain long-distance relationships with their significant others. For other students, the fact that IM occupies a lot of time and is potentially addictive, drives them to refrain from using IM, perhaps resorting to more traditional methods to maintain distant friendships.

ONE FINAL WORD, MOM....

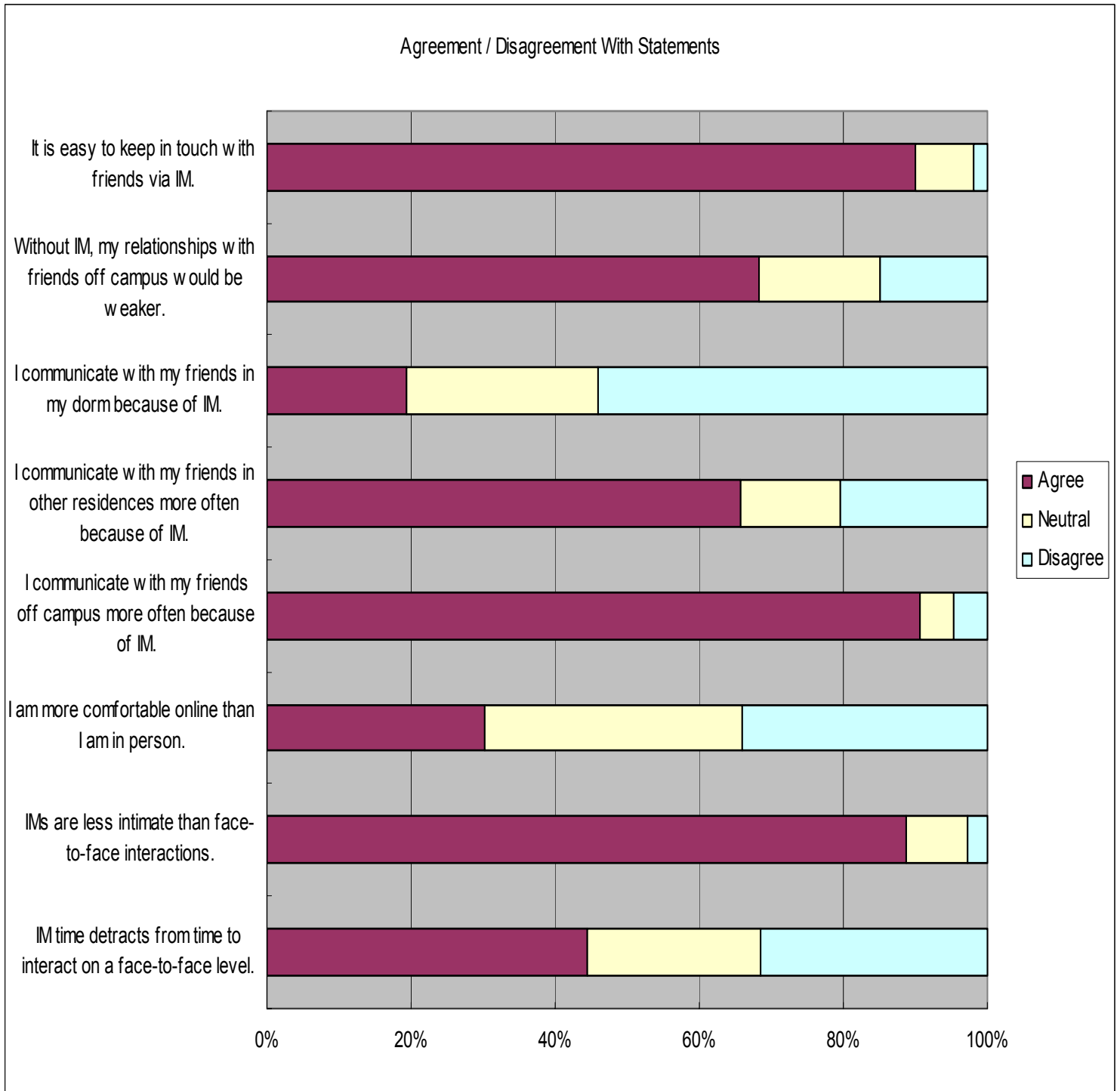
The Internet is full of paradoxes, and IM adds another level to this paradox; how can IM be simultaneously time-consuming and less intimate than f2f interactions yet enhance and strengthen friendships? Future studies may attempt to determine the psychological mechanisms behind the workings of friendships maintained by IM: why do friends choose to use IM to communicate and keep in touch, even though they feel that it consumes more time than other traditional forms of communication? And what are the effects of a relationship founded exclusively on IM? An important point to keep in mind is that IM is not a stand-alone tool for interpersonal relationships—it is only a supplement. Instead, Sara Hernandez-Villegas, a Stanford freshman participating in a pilot class experimenting with IM, expresses a common sentiment in a panFora⁷ posting about meaningful online interactions via instant messaging: “[I]t is very important for us to remember that however useful these electronic tools are they cannot be a replacement for personal relationships with others” (Hernandez-Villegas 2003). Perhaps 14% of teenagers (in Silicon Valley) have met friends online (Kaiser), but IM supplements already existing friendships best. IM, although highly addictive, helps deepen and enhance

⁷ panFora is part of Stanford’s experiment to utilize online discussion boards for academic discourse.

interpersonal relationships if a balance between time on IM and f2f interaction can be found. It is faster than e-mail and cheaper than telephoning. But it will never replace traditional face-to-face interactions. Rest assured, Mom, IM simply allows me to connect with my real-life friends better; I will always meet new friends in person.

Appendix A

Table of percentages in Fig 2 graphically represented



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