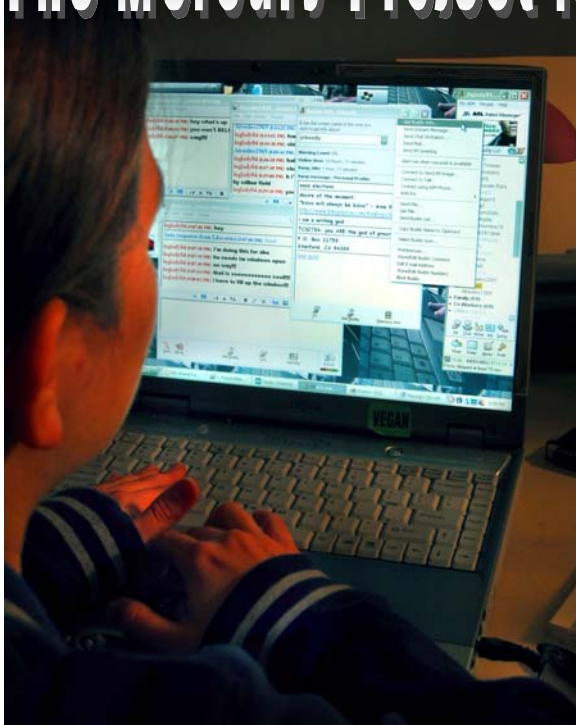


The Mercury Project for Instant Messaging Studies



The Effect of Instant Messaging on the Social Lives of Students Within a College Dorm

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INTRODUCTION

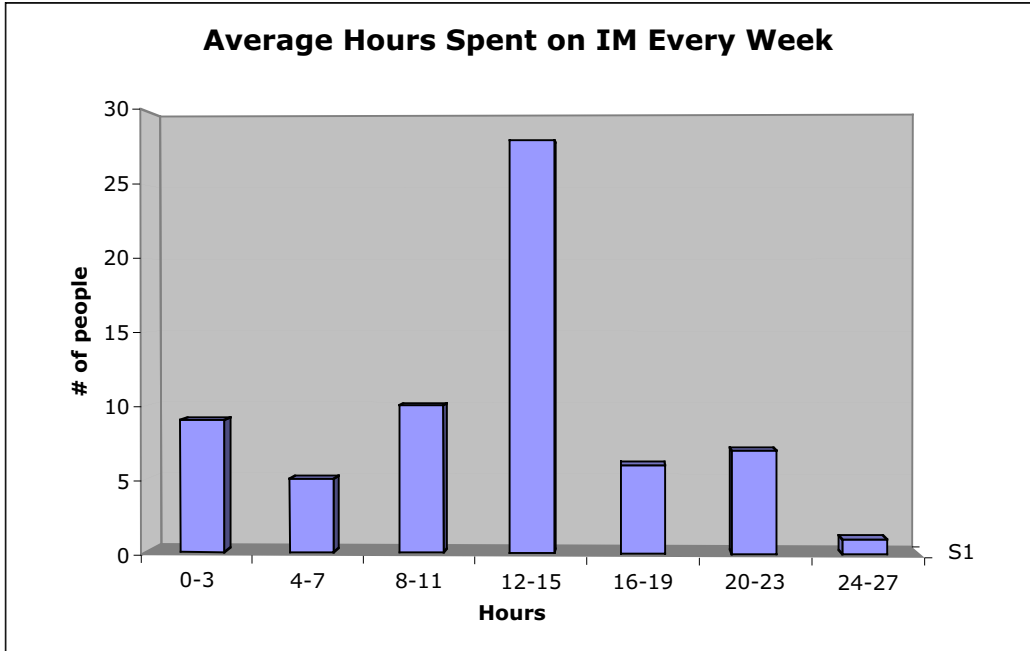
If one were to ask a typical college student his or her favorites means of communication, many are likely to answer that instant messaging (IM) is one of their top choices. Nationwide, as colleges become increasingly technology-dependant, there is an increasing number of students using IM as a primary source of communication. Despite the popularity that instant messaging is gaining in the mainstream collegiate culture, most research only looks at general online interaction and its consequences on face to face social interactions. The studies are very general and do not concentrate on a specific medium of online communication. The research presented in this paper will investigate the different aspects of instant messaging that contribute to its effects on socialization including: the background of IM, early and later research on general online interaction, and the relationship between IM and the trends found in general online interactions in order to explore the ways that instant messaging, in particular, affects the social lives of college students.

BACKGROUND

Instant Messaging (IM) is a relatively new means of online communication. IM uses almost nearly synchronous text chats that allows two individuals to communicate in real time.

(Grinter p. 21, 2002.) Instant messaging first began to become popular in the mid 90's following its predecessors IRC's (internet relay chat) and MUD's (Multi User Dungeons) footsteps. IRC is an older program, which is still in use today, which is "a small program that allowed users to communicate on hundreds of servers dedicated to just about every topic imaginable" (Sines.) Similarly, MUD's is a interactive role playing chat program that allows people to communicate with each other in an interactive virtual community. (Shay, 2003) Although similar to them in many ways, one main difference between the older communication programs and IM is that while these older programs allow strangers to meet others they don't know in a virtual community, instant messaging is intended to allow individuals to communicate online with others that they already know from real life (Grinter p. 21, 2002).

4 main companies dominate the online market: AOL Instant Messenger (which according to observation, is used by most IM users here at Stanford,) MSN Messenger, Yahoo! Messenger, and ICQ. (Sines, 2002). The biggest group of IM users are college students. The Pew Report has found that 29% of these students tend to use IM as a form of communication at least once a day compared to 12% of the general population that uses IM once a day. (Pew Internet Report, p. 15, 2002). However, based on a survey passed out at Stanford University, 90% of the students use IM on a weekly basis.



This survey, given out to 70 undergraduate students, asked the participants about various aspects of how they use IM including the topics they discussed, how much time they spent online, how comfortable they felt over IM and in person and how they used IM to flirt with others . Almost three-fourths of the students indicated that they would be as likely (if not more,) to gossip on IM than with any other tools of communication (i.e. phone, etc.) Two-thirds of the students also that they also would be likely to use IM to set up social events in real life as well as use it for ranting and complaining. Other popular activities through IM include wishing a friend a happy birthday and flirting (Survey, 2003). Although these survey results are from Stanford students, these responses are probably representative of college students nationwide.

EARLY RESEARCH REGARDING ONLINE INTERACTION

Early research on online interaction shows that online interaction causes its users to reduce their social abilities because of less face to face interaction with others. As argued by Barry Wellman, only a limited number of waking hours exist in a day. When one uses the

internet, “the internet may compete for time with other activities in an inelastic 24-hour day,” including activities that would have the users interacting with others in real world situations.

(Wellman p. 439, 2001). In addition, as Tom Tyler points out, online interaction could possibly even replace those activities that one traditionally does in the real world.

The ease of online communication may lead to weaker social ties, because people have less reason to leave their homes and actually interact face to face with other people. The internet allows people to more easily...form and sustain friendships and even romantic attachments from their home...engage in political and social-issue based discussion with others from their home (Tyler p. 196, 2002).

If people find it easier to sit at home and do their everyday tasks without interacting with others, those people may end up not making social connections with those around them thus isolating themselves in their homes.

Critics say that online interaction displaces face to face interaction and does not contribute the same benefits that a real life interaction would. According to Tyler, real-time forms of interaction (i.e. face to face and phone,) are “of a higher quality” than online interaction because, as studies have shown, people who talk with others in real space tend to have a better overall emotional well-being (Tyler p. 196, 2002). Supporting this claim Gross notes in his study that those who spent a portion of their time engaged in online interactions (as little as 3 hours/week) apparently showed a higher rate of depression and less social support (Gross p. 75, 2002).

Face to face interaction is of a higher quality than online interaction because it provides nuances that cannot be reproduced by online communication. (Wellman, p. 439). Whether it be because of the physical presence of the individual, the “material aid,” that they contribute or the greater amounts of emotions that stem from interacting face to face with a person (Wellman, p. 439), online interactions are perceived as less personal than offline interactions.

Specifically, one of those intangible things that can't be duplicated by online interaction are social cues (Tyler p. 197, 2002). When a person communicates online, they can show none of the physical cues that they could face to face. The receiver can not interpret the tone of the voice, the facial features, or the body movements of the person communicating with him. The lack of non-verbal information makes this interaction incomplete and more deindividuated (Tyler p. 197, 2002).

LATER STUDIES REGARDING ONLINE INTERACTION

Despite the initial concerns raised about the isolating effects of online interaction, the later research conducted reached very different conclusions regarding virtual communication. One of the findings by Gross indicates that IM is not much different than other forms of communication despite the newness of the it. People, especially teens, use the internet as simply a form of communication much as they would use a phone; they don't hope to express a new identity or personality through it (Tyler p. 197, 2002). Online communication is simply another convenient form of communication, much like the phone has traditionally been, which acts a tool to talk to others.

Further studies on Kraut's original depression studies have shown that despite what Kraut first found, very little connection exists between depression and the amount of time spent online (Tyler p. 196). There are at least two possible explanations for this new finding. The first one states that the internet creates an initial increase in depression. However, in approximately two years, as soon as the person becomes a "sophisticated internet user," the level of depression is reduced (Tyler p. 196), due to the acquired familiarity of the internet by the user. The second explanation posed is that an intrinsic flaw exists in Kraut's research. Kraut chose to concentrate on seventh graders and reached the conclusion that the internet attributed to their higher levels of

depression and ill-being. However, what Kraut does not mention is that most adolescents go through a transition period when they are in 7th grade (Gross p. 76, 2002) where they become more isolated and depressed. These students would most likely have elevated levels of depression even if they had not been exposed to the internet. Simply blaming one thing, such as IM, for the adolescents' rebellious behavior is impossible.

Possibly the most striking findings is that everyone is not affected in the same way. While studies by Parks and Floyd have found that shy people seem to “derive as much social support from online interaction as from FtF communication” (Moody, p. 394, 2002), they make no parallel claims for extroverts. Similarly, in Gross' study of adolescents, he finds that while some of them, those who felt more comfortable with their school mates, use the internet “to seek out additional opportunities to interact with them,” another group of students acts differently.(Gross p. 87, 2002). These students feel alienated from their schoolmates and feel as though they don't belong to the rest of the community. Instead of using the internet to interact with peers, they “were more likely to communicate through IM's with people they did not know well (i.e. strangers vs. friends)” (Gross p. 87, 2002.). So many people use online interaction in so many different ways that as McKenna and Bargh explain, “there is no simple main effect of the Internet on the average person” (Tyler p. 197, 2002).

THE SPECIFIC ROLES THAT IM PLAYS IN SOCIAL LIVES OF STUDENTS

Immediate Interaction

“Ping,” the bell from the computer rings as the AIM buddy icon bounces in the menu. A red “1” appears on the icon indicating that a new IM message has been received from a buddy. Immediately, the student that had been downloading music, clicks on the icon to find out who

IM'd him. Seeing that its his friend from back home, he proceeds to begin typing "Wuzzup dawg. R U done w/ skool yet?"



A screen shot from an awaiting IM message an

This scene may seem familiar for many Stanford students, but it probably sounds foreign to those who did not grow up with IM. Surveys have shown that a considerable number of parents and other adults who did not grow up using the internet believe that “children that spend too much time on the Internet develop antisocial behavior” and “going online too often may lead children to become isolated from other people” ((Gross p.75, 2002), Despite the bad press, if one looks at the features of IM, it would actually appear that this form of online communication would encourage interaction among students.

The features of IM such as the ringing bell, the bouncing icon, and the appearance of a new window that announces the arriving of a message impel the user to reply to the message as quickly as possible. This imitates the sequence of a conversation where a student will ask another student a question and expect an immediate response. According to Gross, it would

seem that “because of its dyadic, real time and private format, the IM is structurally and functionally comparable to other important and pervasive forms of social interaction in adolescence: ‘hanging out’ face to face and talking on the phone” (Gross p. 77, 2002.) How is it that despite the emotional loneliness that should be caused by usage of IM, Stanford students (90% of who use IM), say that they are very satisfied with their Stanford experience including their residential life? (Stanford Daily, 2003). The answer seems to be that these blanket statements about how IM affects interaction of students (i.e. increases loneliness), are not well thought out. So many different students have different responses to IM that the statement will only cover a small population of the many students that use IM. A hasty generalization, especially one that contradicts the nature of IM doesn’t seem appropriate given the variety of IM chats that go on.

Multi-tasking

College students are very busy people. Between classes, studying, sports and getting to know their neighbors, students have very little free time to do much else. According to Seth Bushinksy, a freshman at Stanford, “Between 18 units of class and over 25 hours of practice a week, finding enough time to sleep is hard enough. Finding time to hang out with others is nearly impossible.” However, almost 90% of the students we surveyed use IM on an average of 11 hrs a week (Survey). Based on figures such as these, it may seem probable that students are hiding themselves behind a computer screen without interacting with the rest of the world. However, this is not the case. Even from pure observation in my dorm, I notice a flurry of activity in the halls any time I am awake. At every hour of the day, hosts of people are always busy doing something other than work. The explanation for this, as the Pew Report found, is that it is common to find “multi-tasking” during students’ online interaction (Pew Report p. 18,

2002). Because of the magnitude of things they have to do in a day, college students are very efficient at multitasking. They have been doing it long before the internet came into their lives (Pew Report p. 18, 2002). It is very common to see students eating dinner with a book in one hand while they are talking with other students. In this respect, IM accommodates itself very well to students' lives. IM conversations do not require that the student focus all of his/her attention on the conversation at hand which allows the student to multitask and talk to other students in multiple IM conversations (Grinter p. 25, 2002), study/do homework, or even talk to other students in real space.

The ability to multitask using IM raises a contradictory argument against it. On one hand, IM is a very useful tool for college students because it fits in perfectly with college students' schedules. Between their oddly scheduled classes and other events, IM allows students to study while still keeping in touch with their real-space group of friends that they otherwise they might not have enough time to talk to. However, exactly because of its multi-tasking feature, some critics argue that IM actually takes away from face-face interaction. Because IM can "draw people's attention away from their immediate physical environment" (Wellman, p. 439, 2002), even though students are doing several things at once, they are not paying attention to the different things they are doing, including talking to other individuals. Student may be able to keep in touch with friends through IM, but these conversations are not considered to be nearly as beneficial as those that take place face to face. What these critics have fail to take into account is that although a portion of the students may replace face to face interaction in their free time with IM conversations, most students use IM students in combination with other necessary activities. The only reason that these conversation can even take place in these busy students' lives is because of the much criticized multi-tasking feature of IM.

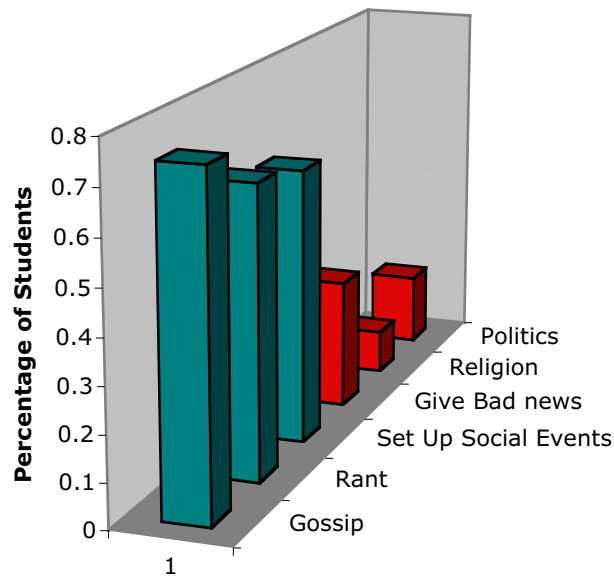
Topics Discussed Through IM

Critics, most notably Kraut, argue that “online relationships are shallow and impersonal” (BoneBrake p. 551, 2002). This could be true if we considered Wellman’s study that found that online relationships “may be more homogeneous in perspective. They often evolve around a special interest such as soap operas (Baym, 1997) or BMW cars (Wellman & Gulia, 1999)” (Wellman p. 440, 2002), because it would be hard to become emotionally involved in a relationship if all that is ever talked about is the same material subject (i.e. which is the better car, etc.). A relationship that revolves only around one thing would probably be one-dimensional and lack emotional ties.

But as noted from the survey results, students using IM do not talk about only one thing. Conversations through instant messaging include many different topics. IM chat are as varied as conversations held face to face. Some students’ online conversations may be shallow and impersonal, but there are also many others whose conversations are very in depth and meaningful. As Bonebrake states, “The Internet provides a unique environment for relationship development; it can be very personal yet at the same time, a feeling of personal space can be maintained” (Bonebrake p. 553, 2002).

One trend that was found in the survey is that if a conversation on IM became too personal for the student, they would use another form of communication to continue the topic. Topics which are normally regarded in real space as impersonal and informal (i.e. gossiping, complaining, setting up social events, etc), were much more likely to be discussed through IM while those topics which are considered more serious and personal (sharing religious and political views, giving bad news) were discussed less on IM and more in person or over the phone (Survey, 2003).

Percentages of Different Types of Conversations Discussed Online



This trend was certainly not true for all the students, but it does illustrate the newness of IM as a form of communication. Although students often use IM to communicate with others, from my experience as a student, we have nonetheless been brought up with the idea that important subjects should be discussed face to face. As Lindsey Hunt, a freshman at Stanford, says “My parents always told me to say important things to the person’s face. If we care for the person, we won’t tell them something important over the phone or much less over an AIM chat. By giving them the firsthand, not only are we supporting the person, we also allow them to connect the information they are being told with a face.” IM is such a new communication technology that students are not exactly sure how to incorporate it into their daily lives. Many students have been told that the most personal/intimate interaction that one can have with others is by talking with them face to face. Even though this belief might change in the future, IM has not been around for enough time to be universally accepted for use in all aspects of social life

(i.e. conveying important information). However, this is not to say that all students feel the same about IM or that IM does not have a place in communication. For those who feel that IM can not be used for very personal topics, IM fits a niche in communication that those users seem to understand: IM conversations can revolve around certain less personal topics, but as soon as those topics become too emotionally charged, they move from an online medium to real-space communication.

CONCLUSION

Interaction via instant messaging is as varied as conversation itself. Some students use it to interact with others within the dorm while others use it as a means of communicating with their friends thousands of miles away from their college. Some students use IM for 23 hours a week while others use it for 1 hour. Although some people paint the use of IM as having adverse consequences, there is such a variety in the use of IM that it is too easy to simplify instant messaging as only being good or bad for students' social lives. Social or anti social behaviors are not directly caused by instant messaging; IM simply enhances the student's social habits. A more accurate portrayal of instant messaging is that it actually is a unique tool of communication that affects everyone differently depending on their personality and social nature.

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