

Instant Messaging and Text Messaging: An Overview

Introduction

Instant messaging and text messaging are forms of text-based communication utilized by today's Internet and mobile phone users. Chat began in 1988 with the Finnish Internet Relay Chat (Cameron & Webster, 2005). Since then, chat has developed into multiple forms of computer-mediated communication. Now chat has evolved one-on-one messaging using instant messaging clients like AIM, social networks like Facebook, mail applications like Gmail, and short messages between mobile phones. Text messaging was not intended for interpersonal communication. Text messaging starting being used for commercial purposes, but users quickly evaluated the technology to suit their needs and began to communicate with each other. The communication imperative of humans allowed text messaging to evolve a frequently used form of computer-mediated communication that is continually expanding (Thurlow, 2003). In this paper, I will examine the use of text messaging and instant messaging by teens and in the workplace. In addition, I will evaluate the interpersonal use of these communication mediums and discuss future uses.

Background

Text messages are messages sent via mobile phone over the wireless network. Messages can be sent to any wireless user, regardless of the person's service provider (Grinter & Eldridge, 2003). Short message service was first available over the Groupe Speciale Mobile network in 1992. Messages were limited to 160 characters using ASCII text. It was not until the late 1990's

that text messaging became popular. It first began to service as a form of communication in Europe and Asia among teenagers when it became affordable to purchase phones and minutes through pay-as-you-go plans. According to a report by Nielsen Mobile (2008), text messaging has increased over 450% in two years. "...A typical U.S. mobile subscriber sends or receives 357 text messages per month, compared to placing or receiving 204 phone calls" (Nielsen Mobile).

Instant messaging refers to the sending and receiving of text-based messages in a synchronous manner between two people or a group of people (Hu, Wood, Smith, & Westbrook, 2004). In 1996, ICQ created and one of the first systems for instant messaging. Teens were early adopters of this computer-mediated communication. The Pew Internet and American Life Project (2005) estimated that 13 million teens were instant messaging in 2000, increasing to 16 million in 2005 (p. 15). Instant messaging began to gain popularity in wealthier homes where people had regular access to a computer (Grinter, Palen, & Eldridge, 2006).

Main Users: Teens and College Students

Teens were the first adopters of instant messaging and text messaging, and they continue to be the leading age group for both technologies. According to a study by Pew (2005), 75% of online teens use instant messaging, compared to only 42% of adults. Almost half of these users send instant messages every day (p. iii). Teens prefer instant messaging to other forms of computer-mediated communication, calling e-mail "something you use to talk to old people, institutions, or to send complex instructions to large groups" (p. ii).

Text messaging and instant messaging among teens is used more to strengthen existing social networks, not to meet new people (Grinter, Palen, and Eldridge, 2006). 90% of teens use instant messaging to stay in touch with friends that attend a different school or who live far away

(Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). Dwyer (2007) found that instant messaging was the preferred communication method used by teens to stay in touch with their social networks. Students claimed that “everyone has it” and they “find it the easiest way to keep in touch with anyone” (p. 4). Students also reported that they preferred instant messaging with friends they did not feel comfortable speaking with on the phone. “It’s informal, very informal you can send a message, they get it on their own time so, you never have to worry about bothering somebody with it” (p. 6).

A study by Grinter, Palen, and Eldridge (2006) found that of the text messaging teenagers they studied, all were instant message users as well (p. 443). Their research led them to conclusions about the similarities and differences between text messaging and instant messaging among teens. Most of the participants said they never turn their phone off, only the volume down when they are sleeping (p. 430). They also stated that other studies said it was good manners to respond to a text messages as soon as possible (pg. 427). This increased effort at immediacy in text messaging communication appears as an attempt to increase social presence. In contrast, Grinter, Palen, and Eldridge’s study showed that instant message users engaged in intense, shorter sessions compared to users who stayed signed on all the time and communicated sporadically (p. 431). These results are difficult to evaluate because the study only observed 13 participants, resulting a very small sample that cannot be generalized to the entire population.

Teens utilize the “buddy icon” feature of most instant messaging programs. It allows users to post a small picture, drawing, or even animated clip to be associated with their messages. Pew (2005) reported that 60% of teens upload a buddy icon to their instant messaging profile (p. 21). Personalized fonts, backgrounds, and icons let teens work on their impression management, increasing their social presence in their computer-mediated communication.

Many teenage instant message users take advantage of the “away” message to communicate with their peers. A Pew (2005) survey stated that 86% of teens have posted an away message at least once, and “39% post an away message every day or almost every day” (pg. 20). These messages are used to tell friends that the user is unavailable and used to solicit communication. Teens use away messages to see who is online without informing others that they are online (Dwyer, 2007). Baron (2005) found that teens used away messages like “Please disturb me” to ask for attention, and “sleeping” as a way to screen messages. College students use away messages and evaluate their peers’ messages as a way of keeping with their friends’ lives (p. 30). Pew (2005) found that 62% of teens have posted messages specifically stating what they are doing (p. 20). This is very similar to the recent addition of status updates on social networks like Facebook and MySpace. Instant messaging and text messaging has created a generation that is used to informing their peers of their status, and having the ability to keep track of their friends.

People can send a message to the user that is away, and it is known that they will most likely not receive a response. While instant messaging comes very close to being a synchronous form of communication, away messages allow users to respond at their own will without regard for immediate feedback. Another factor that make instant messaging less synchronous is the fact that the receiver has to wait for the sender to finish typing to receive the message (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). Several instant messaging clients display when the other user is typing, allowing users to know who is going to say something. This constricts social presence because the feedback is not immediate. Also, less social cues can be interpreted because the receiver cannot see if the sender is changing message as they type. A person can type a message, then decide they want to change the phrasing. In FtF communication once the sender starts talking,

the receiver is already interpreting the message.

Grinter, Palen, and Eldridge (2006) found that instant messaging and text messaging both have an awareness component. Instant messaging clients show users the status of their friends and if they are available to be contacted. Text messages are sent directly to the handset of the receiver, allowing the receiver to read the message regardless of location or time (p. 444). Text messaging is often used to “microcoordinate” or “hypercoordinate.” Teenagers use text messaging to inform people of changes to existing plans because they are already away from a computer, unable to instant message. Almost 25% of text messages in their study were focused on making plans to communicate (p. 443). This shows that text messaging is used as a supplement to other forms of communication, often being used to organize FtF communication at a later time.

In 2005, Pew reported that 45% of teens owned a cell phone and 33% of all teens had sent a text message (p. ii). Another study in 2005 by Pew found that out of 36 million American adult cell phone texters, 63% of them were part of generation Y, ages 18-27 (Rainie, 2005). In the second quarter of 2008, teen mobile users in the US (ages 13-17) sent 1,742 text messages a month, more than double the number of messages sent by the second highest age group, 18-24 year olds (Nielsen Mobile, 2008). Teens only made 231 mobile calls a month, giving the appearance that they communicate through text messages more frequently than mobile phone calls. The article states that these results mean text is more popular, but that does not mean more is being communicated through text messages. The number of messages most likely includes conversations, which could easily add up to 5 or more messages. Also, the length of the telephone call is not considered. There is not enough data to completely interpret the statistics.

In the Workplace

The effectiveness of instant messaging and text messaging in the workplace has been an ongoing debate. While little research has been conducted on the use of text messaging in the workplace, the relevance of instant messaging in the workplace has increased. Businesses are seeing the benefits of having employees work remotely. They save money on travel, childcare, and office space. This switch to telecommuting has changed the way people communicate within organizations (Galushkin, 2003). 28 million business users are sending 1 billion instant messages each day (Avrahami & Hudson, 2006). Daft and Lengel categorize instant messaging and text messaging as lean media, making it unsuitable for interpersonal communication and more fitting for task-based communication (as cited in Hu, Wood, Smith, & Westbrook, 2004). Dennis and Kinney agree with this statement and state that CMC is better suited for direct and concise tasks. Avrahmi and Hudson (2006) discovered from previous research that instant messaging in the workplace works well to complement other forms of communication. Instant messaging was used for “quick questions and clarifications, coordination and scheduling, to discussions of complex work” (p. 505).

FtF communication can cause communicators to look deeply into nonverbal cues, misinterpreting the stated task (Galushkin, 2003). The media richness of FtF communication in the workplace can actually work against productivity because employees can feel inferior and nervous to speak with a manager. Media richness states that the quality of communication is determined by the bandwidth. Communication through instant messaging or text messaging is less “rich” because there is no audio or visual aspect, filtering out non-verbal communication like facial expressions and tone of voice. If an employee has to address his/her superior, communication can be of better quality if he/she is given time to formulate their question or

response, without worrying about feeling inferior. Galushkin (2003) believes this makes text messaging a more valuable communication method (p. 7). It can also be more useful when used as an additional communication means to facilitate fast communication between users at distant locations (pg. 11).

Instant messaging in the workplace can prove to be productive and distracting. Cameron and Webster (2005) investigate the effects of instant messaging in the workplace. Critical mass was an important factor in determining the number of users that instant messaged in the workplace. One company had the entire staff using instant messaging, while another had less than 20 employees using the communication technology (p. 95). This can be justified by the diffusion of innovation theory. The first company made it past the critical mass making it crucial for all employees to communicate through instant messaging. The second company only had the early adopters using the technology, leaving them at the beginning of the S-curve, still waiting to reach the majority.

The status indicator of instant messaging clients gives all users of the system presence awareness, meaning everyone has a general sense of the status of their co-workers (p. 86). They can see if the person they are trying to reach is online or away and how long they have been online or idle. This can be a problem if people frequently have questions for a superior, ultimately affecting their productivity because of the distractions (pg. 93).

The reduced social cues theory states that one cannot receive the full message if they cannot see the non-verbal cues associated with a message. In contrast, the symbolic interactionism theory states that the medium itself is a choice, and therefore is a non-verbal cue. "Communication via IM may suggest a light and informal tone, non-authoritative conversation, and the breaking down of hierarchical barriers" (p. 91). Instant messaging has different

connotations in different organizations. The medium varies depending on who is using it, and that must be taken into account when evaluating instant messages within certain workplaces.

A study by Avrahami and Hudson (2006) researched how people communicated via instant messages different with co-workers and friends. When participants communicated with co-workers the individual messages were longer, the conversation time was shorter, and the messages were sent at a more rapid pace (p. 509). Conversations with friends consisted of more messages and required less attention. When communicating for work purposes there is usually an identified task that the communicators are trying to complete following specific instructions. Complete attention and quick responses makes this communication more efficient. Avrahami and Hudson clarified their results by predicting with 79.3% accuracy if conversations were work or friend related without looking at the content of the discussion (p. 513).

Interpersonal

Early theories on computer-mediated communication regarded text messaging and instant messaging as inferior forms of communication compared to FtF and telephone communication. However, H. Kim, G. Kim, Park, and Rice (2007) state that since computer-mediated communication has become more readily available, media richness is less of a factor for quality of communication. “For example, greater socio-emotional content and relational development in mediated communication” (Kim H, Kim G, Park, & Rice, 2007). They found people that text messages already have an ongoing relationships because they must know each other well enough to determine the context of the short message. Instant messaging and text messaging are used in addition to other forms of communication. Instant messaging is can be used to check in with someone, arrange future FtF meetings, and for daily social conversations (Kim H, Kim G, Park,

& Rice, 2007).

Dwyer (2007) found in previous research that social cues are reduced when using communication technology (p. 10). The theory states that computer-mediated communication filters out non-verbal cues limiting the amount of interpersonal communication. Walther's social information processing model states that the cues are still present, but are learned over time and transferred at a slower rate (p. 1). These cues that have developed over time include the use of emoticons, acronyms, and humor. After communicating with an individual for a lengthy period of time, one learns their habits in any form of communication.

Social cues may be less present in text messaging and instant messaging, but that does not mean it is a less interpersonal form of communication. Hu, Wood, Smith, and Westbrook (2004) found that people often instant message late at night, in their home in privacy. These communication mediums allow for more self-disclosure because people have more privacy. The social penetration theory states that verbal intimacy is developed by self-disclosure. This makes instant messaging and text messaging ideal forms for increasing intimacy in relationships. Also, people that communicate frequently through instant messages have a greater desire to meet in person (Hu, Wood, Smith, & Westbroo, 2004). Teens show the same pattern of self-disclosure through instant messaging. A Pew Internet Study (2005) reported that 20% of teens have used instant messaging to ask someone out, and 19% have broken up with their significant other using instant messaging as well. They state that it is easier to communicate these feelings without being affected by the emotions of the other person (p. 23). Other teens consider text messaging private and "the same as passing notes" (p. 28).

Future Use

Text messaging and instant messaging are beginning to overlap. AOL Instant Messenger allows users to send and receive messages via mobile phones, without accessing the Internet. Twitter allows users to update their “microblog” for anyone to see and reply to. Facebook can send users updates to their mobile phones through SMS and allows users to send messages and leave comments on their friends’ walls. The increasing popularity of smart phones and web browsing via mobile devices is blending the line even further. Users can access their entire buddy list, set away messages, and be constantly available to their phone contacts and instant messaging contacts. Several websites exist that enable users to send text messages to mobile phones via computer, and visa versa. Soon there will be no distinction between text messaging and instant messaging because people will have access to the same network of people whether they are at their computer or on the go.

This paper focused on text-based instant messages and mobile messages. Computers and mobile phones are being manufactured with built-in cameras. For computers this means people are able to participate in audio and video chats using an instant messaging client like AIM or Jabber. Users can send photos, music, and files through instant messaging services, and with increased bandwidth it will become normal to video chat with friends, increasing media richness. Obviously voice chat with mobile phones already exists, but with advances in camera phones and increased bandwidth video conferencing via mobile devices is not far in the future. Users mainly use the text aspect of instant messaging, and I believe they always will because of the ability to multitask and the increased privacy. I feel the same for text messaging because people already use it more than making mobile phone calls.

In the near future I believe more people will use text messaging and instant messaging as standard means of communication. The adoption of instant messaging in the workplace is a solid

indicator that it will become the general practice of many Americans. Typing skills may be an issue in adoption of these technologies, but as the generations get older more people will have acquired typing skills and be comfortable with technology. Younger generations have an increased ability to multitask because they have grown up around the technologies. Teens regularly utilize these technologies and are experienced with multitasking and maintaining multiple social networks through a variety of communications. Text messaging and instant messaging continue to grow, and I believe we will see the presence of these communication technologies in many forms.

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