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(Re)defining Relationships in a Mediated Context: Graduate Student Use of Synchronous Computer- Mediated Communication

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(Re)defining Relationships in a Mediated Context: Graduate Student Use of Synchronous
Computer-Mediated Communication

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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ABSTRACT

This study consists of qualitative interviews with 8 graduate students about the use of synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC), or instant message (IM), programs in their interpersonal relationships. Participants were interviewed twice, once via an instant message program and once in a face-to-face setting. They were asked about their frequency of use, their use of multi-tasking, and the types of conversations they have via IM. Results of the interviews are discussed, with a concentration on the paradoxical nature of IM communication as impersonal, but at the same time, conducive to personal disclosure and intimacy.

Chapter 1: Why Study Instant Messenger

If you happen to slow down and peruse the shelves the next time you walk past the young adults section in your Barnes & Noble, you'll likely notice the brightly-colored covers of the recent trilogy of books that Lauren Myracle has written. Each book in the trilogy gets its own color, dark pink, blue, and green. The simplicity of the covers, however, is belied by the seemingly foreign language in which the titles appear. For boldly disrupting the calm seas of pink, blue, and green are the black letters *ttyl*, *ttfn*, and *l8r*, *g8r*, respectively. And above each title are three "emoticons," or yellow smiley faces, each representing a different emotion or mood. Despite the unfamiliar titles, books are all written in English. But one could say that they are also in a language all their own.

With this trilogy, Myracle dives into the world of instant messaging (IM), the process through which acquaintances interact online in synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC). IM applications are free, downloadable programs that allow users (who I'll call IMers) to "chat" with one another in private on-screen windows. The process has been likened to a faster, synchronous, form of email (Bell et al., 2004), though its popularity and vast array of features make it a unique form of online communication.

Imagine you stop at the shelf, reach down, and grasp in your hand the dark pink copy of *ttyl*, the seminal work in Myracle's series. Upon flipping to any page in the book, you'd become privy to a random instant message conversation between two of the

three 16 year-old heroines of the story. You'd see a format similar to that of a play: characters' names are followed by a colon and informal (some would say butchered) line of dialogue, capturing daily high school struggles, such as peer pressure, gossip, and boys. Instead of Romeo and Juliet, however, main characters have names like *Snow Angel* and *mad maddie*. You'd soon learn that these are the main characters' "screen names," self-chosen nicknames, or handles, that IMers use when chatting with other IMers.

Each conversation in the book is in instant message form, complete with the date and time at which it took place. Thus, the entire story unfolds through a series of IM conversations, making it an "epistolary novel for the 21st century" (Barnes & Noble, 2008).

Myracle's series is quite popular, putting her on the New York Time's bestseller list and earning generally positive reviews at the most popular online book stores (Amazon and Barnes & Noble). The trilogy reflects the growing popularity of IM communication, and exemplifies some of its distinguishing characteristics: screen names, emoticons, fast-paced conversational exchange, jargon, and a modified/abbreviated vocabulary. It also reflects and perpetuates the widely-held notion that IM is a medium of communication for teenagers and college students. This trend is present in much of the research on IM (Baron & Ling, 2007; Baron, Squires, Tench, & Thompson, 2005; Clark, 2005; Gray, 2002; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001; Thiel, 2005).

Though one of the most popular forms of communication among teens (Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001), IM communication is not restricted entirely to the domain of

high schoolers; it has become a prominent means of communication for adults as well, though significantly less research has addressed the use of IM by this population (for one of the few studies in this area, see Shiu & Lenhart, 2004).

For this reason, I believe that further research must be conducted on the use of IM by populations other than high school and college students. As a current graduate student in my mid-twenties, I make frequent use of IM to keep in touch with friends and family, including those I see regularly and those who I see much less frequently. I believe that other graduate students, ranging from their early twenties and older, find themselves in a similar situation. That is, IM plays an integral role in relationship maintenance. In fact, much of the research on teens and college students found that individuals utilize IM more to maintain existing friendships than to make new ones (Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, & Shklovski, 2006; Greenfield, Gross, Subrahmanyam, Suzuki, & Tynes, 2006; Grinter & Palen, 2002; Lenhart et al., 2001; Lewis & Fabos, 2005). As such, I'd like to discover whether this holds true for graduate students as well. And if so, how and to what extent does IM contribute to relational maintenance. In this study I conducted qualitative interviews with eight graduate students in order to see

1) how IM is used as a medium of communication in graduate students' close, personal relationships. Drawing on my participants' experiences as well as my own use of IM over the past several years, I wanted to see

a) what benefits it affords. And

b) how users adapt IM to fit their relational needs. A broader aim of my research is to understand the contradictions surrounding Instant Messenger as an online medium

characterized by an absence of the “personal” in terms of vocal and nonverbal cues that nevertheless seems to effectively foster the development of intimate relationships.

Chapter 2: Current Scholarship

Current scholarship on general computer-mediated communication (CMC) is a good place to begin, as there is significantly less, (though increasing) research being done on IM. Both will be examined below, beginning with the broader CMC and moving to the more specific IM communication.

CMC as Inferior to Face-to-Face Communication

Much of the research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) compares it to existing forms of communication, most prominently face to face communication. Additionally, other research that does not necessarily compare CMC with f2f communication nonetheless attempts to evaluate CMC as a positive or negative form of interaction. Often, the conclusion is that CMC is a less personal form of interpersonal communication.

For example, a common stereotype in our culture is the computer geek, who has turned to computers because of an inability to function socially. Caplan (2003) addresses just such an issue, which he labels problematic internet use, in an empirical study of undergraduate computer users. Following previous research which has touched upon the same idea, he believes that the anonymity afforded by CMC makes it an attractive medium of communication for lonely, depressed individuals (Turkle, 1995; Walther, 1996). Thus, his goal was to determine whether a correlation exists between internet use and psychosocial well-being. Specifically, he hypothesizes that individuals with “psycho-social problems” – depression and loneliness – will prefer online communication

as a means of avoiding f2f interaction, which, they perceive to be more intimidating. Their dedication to CMC, he believes, will result in increased depression and loneliness.

Following his survey of nearly 400 undergraduate students, Caplan found that depression and loneliness often lead to a desire for CMC rather than f2f interaction. Moreover, he found that a preference for online interaction does in fact contribute to problematic internet use.

This study highlights one of the prominent themes in the literature on CMC. That being the positioning of CMC and f2f communication as diametrically opposed to one another. For example, in the above study, Caplan instructed participants to evaluate statements such as, “My relationships online are more important to me than many of my face-to-face relationships” and “I am willing to give up some of my face-to-face relationships to have more time for my online relationships” on a Likert-type scale.

By comparing online relationships to f2f ones, the goal becomes to determine which constitutes a “better” form of communication. Subsequently, CMC is often relegated to secondary status in its ability to facilitate effective interpersonal interaction.

Indeed, the subtitle of a 2002 study by Cummings, Butler and Kraut blatantly declares “Online Relationships are Less Valuable than Offline Ones.” The same argument is made, though not as explicitly, in a 2003 study by McQuillen. In both instances, the authors compare the quality of relationships that are maintained online with those that are maintained f2f. Cummings, Butler and Kraut cite an early study by Parks and Roberts (1998), who found that ninety-three percent of the MOO¹ users they surveyed rated their offline relationships higher than the ones they had developed online.

With this in mind, they conducted a study of 39 undergraduate students who made frequent use of email communication. This was a recreation of a 1991 study they conducted on nearly 1,000 bank employees (Kraut and Attewell). As with the earlier study, they found that students considered email communication an “inferior means” of maintaining interpersonal relationships compared to f2f and by telephone.

Moreover, the authors develop a variable they call “relational strength,” which is composed of the questions, “How close do you feel to this person” and “How often do you get favors or advice from this person.” Assuming these two questions can accurately measure the strength of an interpersonal relationship, the researchers found that f2f and telephone communication were both better predictors of a strong relationship than was communication via email.

Returning to McQuillen’s study, we find a similar critique of online relationships. He claims that Walther and Tidwell’s (1997) concept of idealized perception – the tendency for a CMC user to see his or her partner as a “perfect person” – actually encourages deceit among users. That is, a person’s messages are obscured by the idealized perception that the user has for him.

Additionally, he argues, CMC allows for deliberate misrepresentation of the self. Because of the lack of non-verbal cues, and the obvious absence of face to face contact, a speaker is free to choose which characteristics about himself he will reveal. McQuillen believes CMC users will “lie by omission” - only revealing their positive characteristics, as these pose no risk to the self (p. 621).

¹ MOOs (and the closely related MUDs) are large, online, multiplayer environments, most popular in the mid to late 1990s. The environments are textually produced, providing a “space” for users to have online conversations.

Finally, he argues that “relational level” messages are limited in CMC and, as such, emotional content is often neglected in these conversations. He claims that text-only communication restricts the amount of shared information between participants, preventing them from “communicating interpersonally.”

Riva and Galimberti (1998) develop a similar argument, focusing on the lack of cues in an online environment. They claim that CMC takes place in an environment that is less “cooperative” than f2f interaction. CMC is lacking “the collaborative commitment of participants and the co-formulation of the message and...the feedback that allows the social meaning of the message to be processed immediately” (p. 9). Moreover, the authors argue that CMC lacks the “rules” of f2f interaction that ensure effective communication. CMC, they contend, creates an asymmetrical relationship between sender and receiver because a response to a message is never guaranteed.

Wright, in a 2004 study, takes a slightly different approach to online communication. He compares exclusively internet-based (EIB) relationships with primarily internet-based (PIB) relationships. The former are developed with no contact other than CMC, while the latter are maintained mostly through CMC, though other forms of contact (f2f, telephone) occur. While Wright’s approach is broad, analyzing the multiple relational maintenance strategies used by these two groups, he nonetheless eventually compares the two in terms of strengthening interpersonal relationships. When he did so, he found that relationships developed and maintained exclusively on the internet had lower relational communication scores than their f2f counterparts.

CMC and Relational Maintenance

The above research paints a bleak picture of CMC. Taken by itself, it would appear that the rise of the internet is concurrent with a decrease in meaningful interpersonal communication. Thankfully, this is not necessarily the case. Additional scholarship on CMC argues for the importance of online interaction, especially in interpersonal relationships. While this literature does little to break the paradigm of CMC vs. f2f communication, it nonetheless posits that online interaction is not doomed to be an inherently flawed medium of communication.

Tidwell and Walther (2002) conducted an empirical study to determine the effects of CMC on interpersonal disclosure and evaluation. The authors utilize Berger and Calabrese's (1975) uncertainty reduction theory (URT) as a means of understanding relational development online. URT posits three types of strategies for reducing uncertainty: passive, active and interactive. Passive strategies are those in which a person gathers information without affecting the other. In active strategies, the person makes a deliberate, but indirect, effort to obtain information about the other. Finally, interactive strategies utilize "direct and obtrusive exchanges" with the other (p. 322).

Tidwell and Walther found that participants used interactive strategies - such as asking direct questions of the other - much more frequently in online communication. In essence, the reduced cues environment of online interaction is more conducive to an interactive exchange. Moreover, they found that CMC users asked deeper, more intimate questions than their f2f counterparts, as a method of coping with "limitations of the channel" (p. 334).

The authors of the above study suggest that CMC users turn to more interactive, deeper disclosure as a means of tempering the restrictions of an online environment. While this may be the case, others argue that CMC users are not engaging in more interactive strategies as a means of coping with CMC's limitations; rather, they argue that users are turning toward CMC precisely because of its reduced cues.

One example is a 2007 study Sheeks and Birchmeier. The authors distinguished four personality types among their participants: unshy-sociable, unshy-unsociable, shy-sociable, and shy-unsociable. The goal of the empirical study was to determine how each personality type makes use of online communication in expressing their "true self," or the qualities that an individual believes he or she possesses (Rogers, 1951). They found that individuals with high levels of shyness and sociability preferred the reduced cues environment of CMC in developing relationships. And while "true self" expression did not correlate to relational development, they found - perhaps more importantly - that individuals whose shyness typically prevents social interaction have, in computer-mediated environments, a vehicle for interpersonal interaction.

Walther and Bunz (2005) and Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) both conducted studies on CMC's impact on interpersonal relationships within groups. The former studied undergraduate "virtual groups" who were responsible for completing school-related assignment via CMC. The researchers charged each of the six groups with a different "rule," such as "Get started right away," or "Communicate frequently" to discover whether adherence to the rule resulted in greater group trust and liking. Following the completion of the assignment, they found that, when groups followed their rule, trust and liking among members increased. While this study holds important implications for

group communication, it also serves to demonstrate the capacity for online interactants to develop interpersonal relationships among them.

Like Walther and Bunz, Etzioni and Etzioni were concerned with group communication. In their 1999 study, they compared f2f communities with computer-mediated communities. They do so through a discussion of the shared characteristics of these two types of communities, including access to other members, interactive broadcasting, an ability to breakout and reassemble, and group memory. They argue that computer-mediated communities are proficient, if not superior, to face to face communities in many of these areas. For example, online communities have a broader reach and – because text is stored – the ability to achieve previously discussed issues. While online communities are not superior in all respects, the researchers conclude that, optimally, a community should incorporate both online and f2f systems. Again, while this study provides valuable information for group communication, it also holds implications for online interpersonal relationships. Specifically, CMC is not the impersonal, maladaptive medium of communication that some researchers are claiming it to be.

Two of the more exhaustive explorations into the area of online relationships are Markham's (1998) *Life Online* and Kendall's (2002) *Hanging Out in the Virtual Pub: Masculinities and Relationships Online*. Both are ethnographic studies of online environments², where participants have developed and maintained relationships almost exclusively over the internet. These studies provide a more thorough understanding of online relationships. For this reason, CMC is not reduced to “better” or “worse” than f2f relationships. Instead, the reader enters into the world of the online user, becoming aware

of the multiple dimensions of CMC and the complex nature of online relationships.

While Markham takes a more autoethnographic approach to Kendall's more traditional ethnography, both researchers highlight similar themes that emerge in online relationships.

Most prominent among these is the dialectical tension between what is "real" and what is "not real." Do "virtual" friendships constitute "real" relationships? If so, can they be equivalent to their f2f counterparts? These questions are addressed by both authors, who argue that, yes, online relationships can be just as real and satisfying for online participants. Of course, this is contingent on how the participants in these relationships view themselves, their partners, and the relationship itself. Markham finds three general themes, or types, of online users: those to whom the internet is a tool for communication; those for whom it is a place where relationships can be developed; and those who see it as a way of being. Thus, it is not a question of whether online relationships are "real" or "unreal," so much as it is a question of how each user experiences the relationship.

To some users, according to both Markham and Kendall, the online experience becomes a truer expression of the self, actually eclipsing the "realness" of f2f interaction. For them, the facelessness of CMC – and subsequent lack of performance pressure – allows for a more honest presentation of who they are. Additionally, online, participants have the chance to edit their words before sending them to the other. As Markham explains, "Many people cannot maintain the same level of outspokenness offline as on" (p. 154).

² The environments studied were online MOOs and MUDs.

The users of the online MUDs and MOOs that Kendall and Markham studied made daily visits to these online environments, developing not only interpersonal relationships but also a virtual community. Meetings were both scheduled and impromptu, often occurring during the week while users were at their offices or workplaces. Thus, virtual relationships become a very real part of their everyday life.

Instant Messenger

Until now, the literature I've discussed has generally focused on relationships as either online or offline, with very little, if any, overlap. In most instances, researchers have attempted to discover what form of communication is "better," or allows for more personal relationships. But, the tendency to position these two in opposition to one another overlooks what is perhaps the most common function of CMC: to communicate with people with whom the user also has an offline relationship. Fortunately, there is a growing body of research that addresses this function of CMC. One process through which "real world" acquaintances can interact online is synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC). One type of SCMC is instant message (IM) programs. With these free programs³, a user creates a screen name and "chats" with his or her "buddies," whose screen names he can store on his list of contacts. Essentially, IM programs allow users to interact in "real-time" with other users in a private on-screen window. Bell et al. (2004) liken it to e-mail with a "continued exchange rather than (a) back-and-forth exchange" (pg. 107).

While much of the aforementioned literature on CMC takes an empiricist approach, research on IM tends to be more qualitative. With its increasing popularity,

³ Many IM programs exist. Some of the most popular are AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), Yahoo! Messenger, and Google Talk.

more and more studies are being produced on the use of IM as a medium of communication. The existing literature is varied, but highlights some of the major themes of IM use.

IM and Interpersonal Communication

IM is first and foremost a tool for interpersonal communication. Though it allows for group discussions, it is used primarily for one-to-one conversation (get cite here). Researchers have found that conversation via instant messenger includes multiple dimensions. In this section, I synthesize the existing research to create four themes that have emerged in the literature on IM use in interpersonal relationships. They are: contacts, disclosure, social status, and connection.

Contacts

IM is primarily a medium for communication in previously existing relationships. That is, where some CMC is between people who have never met, the vast majority of IM conversation is between “real world” acquaintances. A recent study of teenage internet use (Greenfield, Subrahmanyam, Tynes, 2006) found that 93% of IM communication is with offline friends, family or other acquaintances. Most other studies on teenage IM use support these findings: teen IM users in Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, and Shklovski’s (2006) and Grinter and Palen’s (2002) studies talked almost exclusively with peers who they first met in school; and all of Lewis and Fabos’ (2005) participants found it “more fulfilling” to chat with friends who were already part of their social group (p. 487). To boot, Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin (2005) found that teens usually IM with the same core group of friends. Indeed, 80% usually only chat with the same small group of friends, ranging from 1 to 5 people. These findings support Lenhart,

Rainie, and Lewis' (2001) report that the majority of teens believe the internet in general is not a good tool for making new friends. Nearly half of them do, however, believe that it strengthens existing relationships.

While the vast majority of IM communication is between previous acquaintances, it is important to note that a large portion of this communication is long distance. That is, people use IM to keep in touch with friends who are no longer geographically close by. Cummings, Lee, and Kraut (2006) studied the ways in which new college students maintained contact with high school friends. Surprisingly, they found that IM (and email) communication delayed a growing apart among high school friends more than f2f or phone conversation did. To make sense of these findings, they propose that the frequency of online communication is not as affected by physical proximity as are f2f and phone contact.

Cummings, et al.'s findings are in accordance with Grinter and Palen's 2002 study. Their participants reported similar use of IM in maintaining long distance relationships, especially among college students. Indeed, 90% of the teens in Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis' 2001 study, and nearly all of them in Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin's 2005 study, report using IM to keep in touch with long distance friends.

Disclosure

Consistent with some of the aforementioned research on CMC, some IM users have found comfort in the facelessness of the medium. That is, they engage in personal discussion on the computer more easily than in f2f interaction. For users, the real-time communication in IM makes the interaction similar to a f2f conversation, but without the anxiety that can come with latter.

For example, Beach and Bruce (2002) – citing a paper by Kathy Simpson (2001) – recall the story of two small-town teenage girls who used IM programs. On the internet, they became more relaxed and sociable, particularly with boys. Said one, “You get more stuff out of them...They’ll tell you a lot more, cause they feel stupid in front of you” (p. 151). Thus, for teens, flirting and sensitive issues can be more easily addressed in the IM environment (Schiano, Chen, Ginsberg, Gretarsdottir, Huddleston, & Isaacs, 2002).

Similarly, Lenhart, Rainie and Lewis (2001) found that romantic relationships among teens were, at least in part, conducted via IM. 25% of the boys in their study and 10% of the girls had asked someone out over IM. Again, it seems the less personal nature of IM makes for easier disclosure: “It’s not the most romantic thing to do, but I was very nervous and it helped make it a little bit easier” (p. 22). In some relationships, found Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis, the large portion of romantic emotions are expressed via IM, such as leaving “love notes” in the middle of the night – on a partner’s IM screen – for him to wake up to the next morning.

Likewise, in a case study by Clark (2005), a teen user named Steph claimed to have “deeper” disclosure online. In addition to her strong writing skills, typing her thoughts and reading them prior to sending an IM allowed for more personal, accurate disclosure of how she was feeling. Steph’s thoughts are echoed in the findings of Thiel (2005), whose interviews with teen girls reveal their comfort using IM as a conversational medium. They admitted to being more “direct and confrontational” on IM than they would have been in f2f conversation, addressing “embarrassing” issues that might otherwise have gone unspoken (p. 191). Again, it is the facelessness of the

medium that the girls cite as their reason for deeper disclosure. Interviewers reported feeling less self-conscious in front of the computer than they did in front of another person.

Social Status

In addition to self-disclosure, IM is also used as a tool for demonstrating social status. The research in this area focuses exclusively on teenagers. “I wouldn’t be as cool to some friends if I didn’t talk on the Internet,” said one participant in Lewis and Fabos’ study (2005). The researchers found that online conversations would often continue the next day in school, making nightly IMing a necessity. Thus IM conversations became a kind of social currency. As such, users would hesitate to reply to certain buddies who they deemed not worthy of an immediate reply. Likewise, they would deliberately delay a response to someone of a higher social status, so as not to give the impression that this was the only conversation in which they were involved. These findings were corroborated by Thiel (2005), whose participants also hesitated before replying to messages, so as to appear busier than they actually were. Moreover, they would brag to each other about their talents in holding multiple IM conversations at the same time. Finally, Lewis and Fabos (2005) found that some users would wait until a buddy sent the first IM, believing that initiating the conversation was inherently deferential.

Thus IM is an important factor in social hierarchy, though it is not solely about competition for status. A full 80% of teens report having used IM to contact friends about social plans (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005). Grinter and Palen (2002) found that events planned on IM included things like shopping and seeing a movie. For teens, IM was much more efficient for organizing than the multiple phone calls that would have

been required to coordinate schedules. Likewise, teen girls used IM to organize “slumber parties, dances and just hanging out” (Thiel, 2005, p. 189).

Connection

A final theme in the literature on interpersonal IM use is that of connection. With the use of new technology in general, and IM in particular, users have the capacity to remain available literally 24/7. By remaining signed into their screen name, users can continually send and receive messages all day. Said one, “It makes me feel plugged in throughout the day...I just like keeping up to date with everybody” (Katz and Rice, 2002, p. 294). Clark (2005) argues that this constant contact gives teen girls a degree of control over their environment and their relationships. Their constant availability online is a type of escape from the control of their parents; it also results in favorable evaluations by their peers.

Of course, a constant presence online does not mean that the user is sitting at his or her computer all day. As will be discussed later, users employ away messages (posts visible to their buddies for when a user remains signed into their screen name, but is no longer physically sitting at their computer.) Baron, Squires, Tench and Thompson (2005) analyzed the use of away messages by American college students as a means of negotiating social activity and personal relationships. With constant internet access on most college campuses, IM users often remain signed online for extended periods of time, using away messages to communicate information to their buddies. Baron et. al found that away messages were a means for college students to “stay in the social loop,” despite not physically being at their computer. Nonetheless, some reported a sense of

feeling “tethered” to their computer when they returned to find multiple messages left for them.

Likewise, Katz and Rice (2002) found that too much contact can be distressing. Some IM users reject the ability to be signed in at all times – instead choosing to come and go as they please – despite feeling pressure from friends to remain online at all times.

IM and Multi-Tasking

Multi-tasking is the norm for most IM users. They have the ability to surf the internet and chat with multiple buddies at the same time. Indeed, most researchers have found that IM users rarely chat with just one person. Usually they are carrying on multiple conversations, emailing, surfing the web, and/or using other computer programs while instant messaging. Lenhart, Madden and Hitlin (2005), who found that almost half of all teens who IM engage in multiple conversations on a near daily basis, go so far as to call IM the “backbone of communication multi-tasking for teens” (p. 22). For the participants in their study, IM was the focus of their online time, with other activities taking peripheral roles.

Lewis and Fabos (2005), who conducted interview with seven IM users, their ages ranging from 14 to 17, found that all of their participants regularly carried on conversations with at least four other people. In fact, one participant was observed negotiating 10 windows at once. These findings echo a 2002 study by Grinter and Palen, whose 17 participants all reported multitasking while using IM. For them, multitasking included both concurrent IM conversations and emailing and web surfing.

Nonetheless, IM users do recognize the difficulties of multi-tasking, often having to “juggle” multiple conversations. Grinter and Palen even found that participants

occasionally lost track of their conversations, typing a message to the wrong IM window. As such, some teens even take pride in their ability to carry on multiple conversations at once (Clark, 2005). Others prefer the discreetness of IM, especially when parents are around. Says Communication professor David Silver, “(they) can be on the computer and it looks like they’re working on their biology homework when really they’re IMing” (Gray 2002).

It is not just teens who are multi-tasking on IM, however. Shiu and Lenhart (2004) report that 53 million American adults use IM programs too. Of these, nearly a third are simultaneously using other computer programs while IMing, and 20 percent are doing something else around the house, such as using the phone or watching television. These numbers apply to “virtually every time” the users are IMing (p. iv).

IM Language

Ostensibly, the greatest difference between IM and f2f communication is the sole reliance on written text to communicate. With this dependency on text has come variations, abbreviations, and acronyms that allow for more quicker, more succinct messages. Additionally, the synchronous nature of the medium is conducive to faster turn-taking; typing out longer messages may result in “interruption” from an incoming message. As such, IM is a distinct form of written communication.

For example, the AOL IM website (www.aim.com) lists over 100 entries in its “acronym dictionary.” These include the popular “lol” for “laughing out loud” and “brb” for “be right back,” as well as more obscure abbreviations, like “dqmot” for “don’t quote me on this” and “b4n for “bye for now.” Though some see this as a bastardization of the written language (Lewis and Fabos, 2005; Stupid AIM Speak, 2005), Herring (2004)

reminds us that early on, “language purists warned of linguistic decay” with the advent of computer-mediated chatting (p. 29). Though they still “continue to fret,” she argues that IM shorthand is not new so much as it is a rebirth of older forms of encryption, like the passing of abbreviated notes in school (p. 32). Nonetheless, this shorthand – including abbreviations, acronyms, and phonetic spelling – is a prominent part of IM discourse, especially among teenagers (Gray, 2002; Thiel, 2005; Thurlow, 2002; Von Sternberg, 2002).

However, some users admit to abandoning acronyms and abbreviations as they mature (Lewis and Fabos, 2005; Stupid AIM Speak, 2005). Said one participant in Lewis and Fabos’ study, “Now I’ve started to type out ‘you’ and ‘are’ ...It looks better... You just seem smarter” (p. 483). Similarly, after misspelling a word, users may type the correct spelling, preceded by an astrisk (*asterisk), to indicate that they caught their own mistake. Additionally, they may be more conscious of proper spelling and grammar when they are trying to impress someone or demonstrate their intelligence (Lewis and Fabos, 2005).

In addition to abbreviations and acronyms, IM language is characterized by shorter, more succinct messages than f2f interaction. The brevity of messages prevent interruption by an incoming message – which may change the direction of the conversation (Lewis and Fabos, 2005). This results in rapid turn-taking. One regular user likened it to “chicken scratches – real short and quick.” For this reason, IM is once again denigrated an “immature” medium of communication. (Gray, 2002, p. 2).

Simpson’s (2005) discourse analysis of conversational floors in SCMC discourse highlights the unique turn-taking practices of IM participants. She pinpoints two reasons

for the lack of “fine-tuning” in SCMC turn-taking (p. 343). First, turns are not visible to the other person until they are sent. That is, a user receives a complete message; he does not see the message as it is being formed.⁴ Secondly, SCMC does not have the visual and auditory cues that are present f2f turn-taking. Thus, users cannot rely on these non-verbal clues, as they do in f2f turn-taking. The result is “disrupted turn adjacency,” where new, incoming messages may disrupt a reply message from the original statement that it pertains to (p. 343).

IM and Identity Presentation/Expression

Another emergent theme from the literature on IM is the presentation and expression of one’s online identity. Most IM programs include a number of adjustable features, making it easy for users to personalize their online self. The away message, a feature allowing users to “post” a short message of their whereabouts should they step away from their computer, is also often used as a space to post song lyrics, quotes, and jokes. Shiu and Lenhart (2004) found that nearly 24 million users take advantage of the away message function.

It is important to note that, because the away message is visible to all other IM users, it is often used to create the appearance of unavailability, though a user may still be sitting at his computer (Baron, 2005; Grinter & Palen, 2002). By doing so, he user can discourage (or ignore) incoming messages while continuing to chat with people of his choosing.

Baron’s conducted a textual analysis of 190 away messages (5 from each of the 38 participants). She cites two general categories into which all away messages can be

⁴ This is true of most IM programs. Although with one, ICQ (“I seek you”), users can see messages as they

grouped: informative/discursive and entertainment. While informative messages may tell of a user's whereabouts, they can also initiate discussion (i.e. - "leave me a message"), provide personal information (i.e. - "finally doing my biology homework"), and provide information to a specific person (i.e. - "John, call me on my cell"). Baron found three types of messages to entertain: humorous messages (jokes, wordplay), quotes (from a book, song, etc.) and a link to a website.

Grinter and Palen noticed that participants eschewed the default away messages provided by IM program (usually "I'm away" or a variation thereof) in favor of creating their own messages. This is a more personal way of conveying information to ones' buddies. They found that users often did provide actual information of their whereabouts, feeling the need to justify their unavailability to their friends.

Research by Shiu & Lenhart (2004) supports the work of both Baron and Grinter and Palen. They studied the use of IM among adult Americans, finding that 18% of users regularly use away messages. Of these, 45% post a unique message about where they are or what they are doing, 21% post a quote or "thought," and 12% post a phone number where they can be reached.

Another way in which IM users express themselves online is through the use of emoticons, or textual "smiley faces." ☺ ☹, created by typing a colon and a parenthesis in tandem, are two basic emoticons. Though gaining popularity with the rise of email and IM, the origins of the emoticon can be traced back 25 years, to an online bulletin board post by Carnegie Mellon professor Scott E. Fahlman (Associated Press, 2007). Since then, emoticons have become a popular means of expressing emotion in the text-based

are being typed. It should be noted that many of the other programs offer a feature which will let the user know when his counterpart is typing, though the words being typed are not visible until the message is sent.

world of IM (Gray, 2002; Ip, 2002; Lewis & Fabos, 2005). Lewis and Fabos found that emoticons remained popular among older users who had abandoned abbreviations and acronyms that they deemed childish or immature. They used emoticons to both indicate pleasure and for friendly teasing.

Most IM programs offer other features for identity expression, though these areas tend to be under-researched. Two of the most common features are the screen name and the profile. The former is chosen upon first creating an IM account, the latter is a space for users to include whatever text they like, visible to any buddies who choose to view it. Additionally, some programs allow users to display a buddy icon – a small picture that appears in the IM window when chatting with others. Lenhart, Madden, and Hiltlin (2005) found that 60% of teens have used buddy icons. These included pictures of athletes, actors/actresses, and cartoon characters. Some even created their own through design programs.

They also found that 56% of IM users created a profile, though the number of teens with profiles was significantly higher than the corresponding number of adults. In their profiles, users included contact information, quotes, jokes, links to websites and links to personal photos. Shiu & Lenhart (2004) found profiles to include similar information, though some users chose not to utilize this feature so as to maintain a certain amount of privacy.

Finally, and perhaps most salient to issues of identity, IM users create personalized screen names. This must be done before they can “sign in” to the IM program, though with the increasing popularity of IM programs, users have had to be more creative in their selection of a name. Perhaps to protect the identity of their

participants, most researchers have not looked at the screen name as a site of identity expression. However, it would be a rich area of study, as screen names are self-selected, and become the outward representation of a user's online persona.

The research that has been done in this area focuses on the number of screen names that users employ. The findings are somewhat disparate, varying most significantly by age. Shiu & Lenhar (2004) report that 17% of adult users have multiple screen names, while Lenhart, Rainie & Lewis (2001) found that a quarter of teen users have two screen names, and nearly a quarter have four or more. Each of the 7 teenage participants in Lewis and Fabos' (2005) study employed multiple screen names.

Users had different screen names for school, for work, and for personal use. By signing on with a name that only a few people know, they are capable of viewing their buddies' away messages and profiles without being swamped with incoming IMs (Lenhart, Rainie & Lewis, 2001; Lewis & Fabos, 2005; Shiu & Lenhart, 2004). Additionally, some users have "secret" screen names, known only to themselves. This allows them to monitor their friends' online whereabouts without receiving any incoming IMs (Lenhart, Rainie & Lewis, 2001).

As becomes apparent through reviewing the literature, most of the existing research on IM concerns the use of the medium by teenagers and undergraduate college students. This is to be expected, as 75% of teenagers who go online use an IM program (Lenhart, Madden & Hitlin, 2005). At the same time, though, a substantial, and growing, number of adult internet users, 42%, also use IM communication (Lenhart, Madden & Hitlin, 2005; Shiu & Lenhart, 2004). Despite this statistic, adult users are almost non-existent in the literature on IM and personal relationships, though there is increasing

interest in how adults utilize IM in the work place (see, for example, Cameron & Webster, 2005; Cherry, 2002; Knight, 2007; Swartz, 2005). While the work on IM use in the office concerns adult usage of the medium, and while this usage does fall under the rubric of interpersonal communication, adults are vastly underrepresented in the literature on IM and personal relationships

Chapter 3: Methods

In this study, I conducted qualitative interviews with graduate students about their use of synchronous computer-mediated communication, or instant message (IM) programs. These programs allow users to engage in “real-time” communication, usually in one-on-one conversation. Specifically, I sought to learn how they make use of these programs within their interpersonal relationships.

IM, in general, is predominantly used to maintain contact with “real world” acquaintances. In fact, one study found that, among high school users, 93% of online buddies were offline acquaintances as well (Greenfield, Gross & Subrahmanyam, 2006). As such, I was concerned with the impact of IM on previously existing, offline relationships, such as family, friends, and romantic partners.

Recruitment

I recruited participants by sending emails to graduate student listserves at a large, state university in the southeastern United States, detailing the parameters of my study and asking for volunteers. The only requirements were (1) participants must be graduate students and (2) they must use IM programs in their personal relationships. I wrote: “I am a graduate student in the department of Communication, looking for participants for my thesis project, a study of graduate student use of instant message programs. Specifically, I am looking at how these programs function as a part of interpersonal relationships. I’d like to talk with willing participants, once via an IM program, and once in person, about these issues. Each interview should take no more than one hour. The

only requirements are that participants are graduate students and that they regularly use an instant message program. Please contact me if you are willing to participate.”

Willing volunteers contacted me through the email address I provided. I had 10 willing participants, 2 of whom eventually were unable to be interviewed, one due to time constraints at her job, the other due to a broken computer that put us out of contact. This left me with the 8 participants. Their privacy was protected through this recruitment procedure, whereby they contacted me after reading the general email I sent to the listserves. Additionally, I kept the names and contact information of all volunteers private.

Interviews

I interviewed 8 participants, first via an IM program and then a face-to-face meeting. Each interview, both online and face-to-face, lasted approximately one hour. In these interviews, my goal was to gain a descriptive picture of the participants' patterns of technology use, and also of the meanings they attach to their online interactions. Some of my interview questions were derived from issues I found in the existing literature (multi-tasking, for example), while other questions I asked were not fueled by any specific, previous research findings (questions about how IM affects the relationship, for example). In this sense, the interviews could be described as semi-structured, falling someplace between what Fontana and Prokos (2007) call structured interviews, which seek to “explain behavior within preexisting categories,” and unstructured interviews, which attempt to “understand the complex behavior of members of society without imposing any a priori categorization that may limit the field of inquiry” (p. 40). In reading some of the literature on Internet research methodology, I found that some

researchers have raised concerns about whether CMC-based interviews (i.e. online interviews) can achieve the highly interactive and rich research relationships that are achieved in face-to-face interviews (see for example, Mann and Stewart, 2000). However others have pointed out the “chatty, dynamic” quality of synchronous online interviewing, which gives researcher and participant “an immediate sense of the other” (Yates, 1996). I decided that by interviewing online, at least initially, I might learn first-hand about the flow and dynamics of my participants’ online conversations (Mann and Stewart, 2000).

My goal in the on-line interviews was to stimulate conversations that would shed light on the use of synchronous computer-mediated communication and its use in interpersonal relationships.

Questions in the initial, online interview revolved primarily around the “how,” “when” and “who with” of participants’ use of IM programs. I asked:

When did you first discover/start using IM?

What IM programs do you currently use?

How many hours/day (week) are you online?

Who do you talk to on IM?

Do you prefer IM over other means of communication?

Are there certain relationships that you use IM for and others you do not?

Has IM changed, or effected, the relationships you have?

What is different about IM from other types of communication?

Do you like IM as a means of communication?

Do you feel restricted by the text-based conversation?

Do you have intimate conversations on IM?

Can/do you display emotion in IM?

In many cases, I asked fairly short, open-ended follow-up questions when I felt it would stimulate further discussion. For example, I probed for examples to deepen the responses (e.g. “Are there certain relationships within which you use IM and others you do not?”) I encouraged participants to talk as much as they liked, and veer away from my questions if they wanted to. In these instances, after I felt a topic was exhausted, we would return to a new question and a new topic of conversation.

Questions during the second, face-to-face meeting sought to clarify and expand on issues from the first interview, particularly in regard to the quality of relationships, goals of relational maintenance, and intimacy. For instance, if a participant mentioned during the online interview that he/she used IM to keep in touch with friends from his/her undergraduate institution, I would ask in the f2f interview for him/her to tell me about that relationship, why it is now maintained (at least partially) online, how far they now lived from one another geographically, and if IM has somehow effected that relationship. After addressing ideas and topics from the online interview, I would move to questions about identity-presentation and multi-tasking. Regarding the former, I asked:

Do you have additional screen names?

How did you choose your screen name?

Do you use away messages?

Do you use IM jargon/slang?

Do you abbreviate words?

Do you use away messages and profile features?

How do you decide when and with whom to talk?

Regarding multi-tasking I asked:

Do you have multiple conversations simultaneously?

Does this affect the quality of conversation?

Do you do school work, house work, watch TV, or anything else while talking online?

Do you feel less responsibility to give your full attention than you do in phone and face-to-face conversation?

Through these questions I expected to gain a picture of what participants actually do and do not do online as well as the meanings they make of their practices. Possibly, general patterns would emerge in the ways graduate students make use of this technology.

Interview Settings

Because the focus of the interviews was on communication via instant messages, the first interview with each participant was conducted over the internet, using an IM program. The written record of these interviews was saved and printed for later analysis.

Following this, I talked to each participant in a face-to-face interview in an on-campus office or classroom. These interviews took place in a secure, private room and were tape-recorded for transcription and analysis.

As mentioned earlier, I hoped that conducting the first interview over the computer would give me an understanding of this form of communication by providing multiple kinds of data. . First, I would have the words, stories, and answers to my questions that each participant provides. Second, I would have the phenomenological

experience of actually being a participant in an IM conversation. Thus I could get an understanding of what it means to take part in this form of interaction.

The face-to-face interview that followed gave me a chance to return to the conversation after having time to reflect on the initial, online meeting. I was able to compare and contrast the two meetings – one over the computer, the second in “real life.” How would the different environments affect the conversation? Would there be more self-disclosure depending on what environment the participant is more comfortable in?

Following the second interview, I thanked the participants and gave them a chance to ask any questions regarding the interview and research. Participants were also given my contact information, should they wish to reach me after the conclusion of the interview process.

Analyzing Data

Data analysis began with transcription. Of course, online interviews were simply stored and printed, providing an exact copy of the conversation. F2f interviews were transcribed from tape recordings, then read repeatedly and analyzed along with the IM transcripts. Through the analysis, I followed a process of looking for similarities and variations across participants, searching for “types, classes, sequences, processes, patterns” (Jorgenson, 1989: 107) with regard to IM uses and meanings. Some of my sorting of data was influenced by the existing literature on IM. For example, categories such as multi-tasking and away message use are fairly prominent in the current scholarship. As such, I expected participants to have experience with these dimensions of IM use, and be able to report on their experience. As most talked extensively about them, I was able to collect multiple instances of these activities and later compare their

experiences with the existing research. I also analyzed the data for meanings that are not present in the existing scholarship. I tried to find “threads” or thematic patterns that seemed to hold particular interviews together (Agar, 1991), and to connect from one interview to another as, for example, in the notion of IM as a paradoxical medium that is both “personal” and “impersonal.” I sought quotes and stories that were revealing of a user’s experience. With the combination of mediated and face-to-face interview material, I was able to confirm many findings from the literature but also to gain new insight into IM use by graduate students.

Chapter 4: Talking about IM

Melissa

I (Michael) had been signed into my IM account since 2:45pm, watching the minutes on my laptop toolbar crawl up to 3:00pm and continue without stop until 3:05pm. *I hope I'm not getting stood up*, I think to myself. Another minute goes by and I hear the computer-generated sound of a door opening, signaling that one of my IM buddies has signed into her account. I drag my mouse down to where I had minimized my buddy list – to see which buddy has just signed on – when I am interrupted by the appearance of a flashing IM window:

LittleGirl55 : Michael?

IM Researcher: yes, hi.

LittleGirl55: Hey, how are you doing?

IM Researcher: i'm doing well, how are you?

Good, I think to myself, Melissa has arrived. *Let's start the questioning...*

I wonder if this counts as a first meeting, I think to myself as I sit outside Subway on a table not quite dried from the recent rainfall. I had talked to Melissa a few days earlier over IM, though this would be our first meeting in the “real world.” At first, I was worried she wouldn't be able to find me in the lunchtime rush outside of Subway, but the rain had scared the crowds into the shelter of nearby buildings and restaurants, leaving me and my tape recorder alone at the table.

I see a young woman walking toward me with a long, purple bandana tied securely around her head and a big bag dangling at her side. I hold eye contact with her slightly longer than I would with most strangers, hoping this is Melissa and that this eye contact will be enough of a clue to let her know I am there to interview her. “Michael?” she asks, and I smile in affirmation.

* * * *

June

JuneBell: hello IMR

JuneBell: i signed on just in time

She's right, I think to myself looking at the clock on my bedroom desk, *it's 10:30am on the dot. But IMR? What does that mean? I thought I knew all the IM acronyms.*

IM Researcher: imr?

JuneBell: IM Researcher

IM Researcher: ooh lol

I'm a black woman, tall. Wild, curly hair. You won't miss me. I keep repeating her words in my head as I sit outside the library, waiting to put a face to this self-description. After a few false alarms (glad I refrained from approaching these potential Junes as they walked by), a confident, but friendly woman approaches me. “Hey, you wore a blue and white striped shirt, just like you said you would!” she smiles. “Yes,” I laugh, “glad it helped you find me.”

* * * *

Chad

I had to register a Gmail account to talk with Chad, and I'm still trying to figure out some of the features as I sit on my couch this afternoon, waiting for 4:30pm to arrive. It seems to have the standard IM features of away messages (but called "status" on Gmail) and profiles, but I want to make sure I can easily save the conversation when we're done chatting. Though Chad has been signed online for awhile, he has an away message up – a lyric from the punk band the Clash – so I wait until 4:30 arrives before IMing him.

Mike: hi Chad, you there?

Chad: hey, ya, just got home a bit ago

Mike: ok cool, are you still able to talk today?

Chad: Sure, i don't for see any problems

I'm glad I got the table with the big, cushy chairs – they are usually the first to fill up at this Starbucks. I put the tape recorder on the table, hoping that Chad will see it when he walks in. Soon I see a young guy in a white shirt walking toward me. He is carrying a cup of caffeine, mixed with some liquid of secondary importance. "Hi," he says, sitting down at my table. A split second later I realize this is Chad, glad he saw my tape recorder and realized who I was.

* * * *

Barry

A mutual friend had put me in contact with Barry, who I interviewed in place of one of the participants who stopped responding to my emails. It's a little after 8pm when

we finally catch each other on Gmail. From the comfort of my couch, I tell him I am still uneasy with this program, as I only registered recently, in order to conduct some of my interviews.

Barry: google is taking over the world, u gotta get down with em. haha

It's dead in the halls of the Communication building, as is usually the case on a Friday afternoon. I arrive a few minutes early for my appointment with Barry in order to print out some papers from the computer lab. Finished printing, I step outside the lab and see Barry walking toward me. "Hi there, ready to do this?" I ask. "Sure thing," he replies, and he follows me down the hall and into my office.

* * * *

Bridgette

Bridgette meets me online at 6pm on Thursday evening. She tells me she's excited to be interviewed, and grateful that she can help out a fellow graduate student. I thank her for her time, and tell her I hope this isn't too big of a burden for her. Bridgette321: its fine, really ☺, I'm just glad to be done with work for the day. it'll be nice to chat for a while.

I meet Bridgette on a bench outside the Communication building. She walks up looking just a little disheveled, but happy. Her brown hair is pulled back into a pony tail and a pair of pointed glasses sit on her nose. "Working full-time and finishing up my Master's work is kicking my butt," she laughs. I laugh along with her.

* * * *

Philip

My interview with Philip was supposed to begin about 45 minutes ago. I sent him an IM, but haven't heard back from him, other than the automatic response from his away message. It provides me with two lyrics from a song by the Counting Crows. A few minutes pass before Philip finally sends me a message:

Philip35: mike! I am soooooo sorry. I was downstairs talking to my roommate and totally lost track of time!!

I am meeting Philip on a Tuesday night, in an empty room in the Communication building. Not sure what to expect, I'm a little surprised when a young guy with scattered blond hair walks in, a Pink Floyd t-shirt peeking out from under a loose jacket. "Hi there, Mike," says Philip, quickly looking around the room before sinking into a chair. "I'm ready to be analyzed," he smiles.

* * * *

Kaitlan

KaitlanSmith99: hello, hello, hello. Glad I could contribute to your project.

KaitlanSmith99: ahh!! I meant *contribute* I hate typos, haha 😊

I tell her I don't mind them too much, but make a mental note to myself to be extra careful in my spelling during this interview.

I meet Kaitlan, a tall skinny girl in her mid 20's in my office. She comes in smiling a big smile, and jumps right into a conversation about the decorations on my

office walls. She seems glad to be here, though I imagine she approaches all situations full of this kind of energy and excitement.

* * * *

Scott

I meet Scott online at precisely 2pm. He is punctual and ready to begin. He tells me he is in the last semester of his Master's work, and will graduate in April with an MBA. As he seems like an efficient, motivated person, I decide to begin the interview right away, so as not to waste his time with any chit-chat.

Scott approaches me at a designated meeting spot on campus, carrying a laptop case, a backpack full of bags, and a bottle of water. Introductions are short, but efficient. He looks to be about 24 years old, and is dressed in a shirt and tie. He tells me that he is coming from work – a part time assistantship on campus.

* * * *

In the following sections, I examine patterns of IM use as they emerged in my conversations with the participants. These include time online, who chats with whom, multi-tasking, and topics of conversation. Additional emphasis is placed on how participants use IM as a means of relational maintenance. In doing so, I look at the medium of IM communication as a paradox, allowing for personal, intimate disclosure, but doing so in an impersonal manner. That is, IM use is inherently void of eye contact, voice, touch, and other dimensions of f2f conversation. Nonetheless, participants find ways to make the medium intimate, often more intimate than phone, or even f2f conversation. I begin with the amount of time that participants are online.

Time Online

Barry: This is embarrassing

I've asked him how often he is logged into his IM account. He tells me he is signed in approximately 8 hours a day, about half of which is spent chatting. Similar online time was reported by the other participants, with variations depending on their day-to-day schedule.

Melissa, for example, is online between 6-9 hours a day during the week; but she is rarely online during the weekend. Similarly, it is not uncommon for Bridgette and Philip to be signed online for a number of hours a day, though Bridgette tells me there are times when she doesn't sign on for days. June is signed online throughout the day on her office computer and Chad and Kaitlan both leave their home computer on 24 hours a day, Chad even when he leaves for work. Scott and Bridgette, who both have computer access at jobs, also frequently remain signed into their accounts all day.

All of the participants chat only a portion of the time they are actually signed online. They may come and go from their computer, or even remain signed online when they are not talking to anyone at all. Perhaps the biggest disparity between time online and time spent chatting belong to Philip, who says, "I would say that I am actually signed (online) for about 5 hours a day, but actually using (IM only) about 30 minutes."

This trend is reflected in the research on IM use, particularly Clark's (2005) concept of "constant connection" (p. 203). Being signed online for extended periods of time makes the user available to others, though he/she is not necessarily chatting the whole time (Katz & Rice, 2002). With this constant connection, users had to find ways

of choosing which conversations to have, when, and with whom, a process that I call IM filtering.

IM Filtering

Chad takes another sip of his coffee before answering one of my questions in our f2f meeting. “Yea,” he says, “I’ll put up away messages. Usually a link to some ridiculous news article.”

Participants struggled with managing their online availability. They all mentioned times when they were online, either to check email, to see who else was online, or to talk with a specific person, and, in the process, had to deal with potentially unwanted, incoming messages.

While all participants make use of away messages, Chad is the most strategic in how he does so. He explains that away messages afford him the option of filtering his incoming IMs. “It allows me to remain more in control of the conversation...because (people) don’t know if I’m sitting at the computer or not.” If he receives a message from someone he does not want to talk to, or if he is too busy to respond, he can ignore the message under the guise that he actually was “away” when the message was received.

To a lesser extent, Bridgette followed a similar routine. She tells me during our f2f meeting that, during our online conversation, she used an away message to discourage others from IMing her. The practice ensures privacy when she wants to concentrate on one conversation. Otherwise, though, she tells me that her use of away messages is very pragmatic (and perhaps the most honest of all the participants): “If I’m generally going to be at my desk for most of the day and available to chat, but like, I’m gonna get up and go

make lunch or go run an errand I'll put, 'Not at my desk. I'll be right back.' Sort of like to signal that I will be back at some point if you want to look for me."

June, on the other hand, will simply ignore incoming IMs if she does not want to chat with the person. If she is busy at work, she'll place a small star next to her screen name, which will appear to whichever buddies have her on their list of contacts. "It means 'don't mess with me,'" she explains. If she wants to chat with only a select few people, she signs into a different screen name that only these close friends know of. Likewise, she has a screen name which is only known to her husband, allowing her to chat exclusively with him without receiving any other IMs.

June's sentiments are echoed by Kaitlan, who explains that she will stay signed online, even when she does not want to chat with anyone. I ask her why she doesn't just sign off at times like these. KaitlanGirl: I stay on so people can leave me messages, i guess. i still read messages even if I'm not actively talking. It's being lazy, i guess-- still want the contact without the work of typing... lol

Like the rest of the participants, Scott struggles with online availability; he uses Google's chat feature so he is automatically signed into his IM account when checking his Google email: When i log into my email sometimes i dont want ppl seeing im available for chat bc i just wanna get in and get out. "I like to use it more for communication in between tasks at work. When I'm at work, it's more like real-time email for me," he says.

Barry is more explicit in how he filters conversations.

Barry: I can...just close the window with lil warning if i want. or say my pc crashed.

For him, it is much more convenient than ending a f2f or phone conversation. Though not the most honest approach, this method, like away messages, procures him the choice of when, and with whom, to chat. Which raises the question, Who are participants communication with online?

Who is Chatting?

Overwhelmingly, the participants talk with friends with whom they have already built a f2f relationship, some of whom are now long distances away. Again, this trend is strongly supported by the existing research on IM (Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, & Shklovski's, 2006; Greenfield, Subrahmanyam, Tynes, 2006; Grinter and Palen's, 2002; Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin, 2005; Lenhart, Rainie, and Lewis, 2001; Lewis & Fabos, 2005).

For all participants, the convenience of IM has made it easier to stay in contact with friends with whom they may otherwise have lost contact. Indeed, chatting with Barry, I must resist the urge to IM some of my friends from home, instead focusing my full attention on him, though his replies to my questions are not coming as quickly as I like. I ask him how IM functions as a means of communication with his friends.

Barry: i hate talking on the phone. and we all have different schedules, as far as time off. so gmail is one place where i know i can catch them at their desk or office

And later on:

Barry: i think its helped me maintain some friendships i would've let fall by the wayside.

Like Barry, Bridgette, Philip and Scott would rather talk to friends online than on the phone. Bridgette tells me, "I grew tired of talking on the phone after working my day job, which required me to be on the phone constantly." Now, she explains, she prefers to

use online communication to keep in touch with friends who she doesn't see in person regularly.

Philip's reason for preferring IM to the telephone is a practical one. He tells me that, when using IM, "I don't have to worry about holding the phone, and I have the freedom to keep half a mind on another task." In the next breath, he mentions a drawback, and how he compensates while using IM, saying "But with the phone I do have the benefit of hearing the voice on the other end which makes conversation a little easier, but IM just needs more description with the message to bring it out which, I think, is easy to compensate for."

Scott explains why he prefers online communication: its better than a phone convo bc u can just say something or answer whenever you're ready. it doesnt have to be immediate. This issue of temporality is important, for though IM communication occurs in "real time" the exchange is not as immediate and demanding as when on the phone. Thus for Scott, who often chats at work, the slight lag in IM conversation is actually preferable.

The same is true of June, who, sitting on a bench outside the library, checks her watch to make sure she is not late for work. She explains that, after getting married and entering a doctoral program, and as her friends have started marrying and having kids, schedules became difficult to coordinate. "There's no time to really chat on the phone (with friends). We have time to chat on IM when we are sitting at the computer because we are not doing anything important, just working. Or we're reading something online, or we're sending email messages."

Her sentiments are echoed by Chad and Melissa, who explain that their busy schedules often are not compatible with their friends' schedules, making phone calls and f2f visits difficult to organize. Overwhelmingly, participants use IM to maintain already-existing relationships. And, while a few mentioned some rare occasions in which they talked with family members, the regular usage of IM programs was to keep in touch with friends, many of whom now live in geographically distant locations.

Most participants seem to suggest that IM promotes relational maintenance. Participants frequently chatted with past acquaintances – from high school or college – who no longer live close by. In fact, most participants prefer it to the phone, suggesting that IM functions fine as a tool for relational maintenance, and for some, even better than the phone. However Bridgette mentions one case in which her reliance on IM as a general means of communication has caused a distancing between herself and one particular friend:

We have grown more distant. Part of that is because she is in another state, but we did use to talk more on the phone and that seemed to make a difference in how often we touched base with each other. Now, it's sort of like - if we see each other online we say hello and chat for awhile, but nothing like how often we used to talk.

Generally, though, Bridgette, like most participants, believes IM allows for continued contact, more so than any potential distancing, especially with two of her closest friends. She attributes this mostly to the convenience of the medium as a one-on-one conversation, saying, "IM allows us to chat at times when their husbands aren't around and they can feel sort of free to speak their mind and share what's going on in their lives."

Kaitlan seems to be the only participant who doesn't prefer IM communication at least some of the time. For her, IM is convenient, because it is free, but she prefers phone and f2f communication over online chatting. "As a poor student, IM is nice alternative to a cell phone bill," she says. And, "IM communication is problematic, but better than nothing. A lot of times, when personal or emotional stuff comes up on IM, it leads to a phone call," she concludes. Nonetheless, IM is a crucial part of maintaining contact with her friends from high school, who are now located in different parts of the country.

Thus, for the vast majority of participants' relationships, even Kaitlan, IM communication has contributed significantly to maintaining contact with existing friends. In the busy, fast-paced world in which we live, contact was frequently maintained by staying signed into one's account as a means of maintaining availability for potential incoming messages from friends. With this constant availability, however, many participants found themselves doing multiple things in addition to chatting online.

Multi-tasking

Unanimously, participants were busy multi-tasking while chatting online. As Scott explains through a number of instant messages, his and his friends' online habits are rooted in frequent multitasking: we were doing this since we were young. multi-tasking is how most of work. maybe u give each a little less attention or theres a bit of a lag on ur response time, but thats ok bc thats the nature of online chatting.

With these thoughts in mind, I ask Chad, "Are you a multi-tasker?" though I believe I already know the answer.

“Yes, yes I have to be. If I’m typing a paper I’ll probably be IMing at the same time, I’ll have music playing or a video going, or god knows what else...a game in the background sometimes. 3 or 4 IM conversations is about the most I can have at a time.”

I ask him if he thinks this detracts from the conversations and he explains that not all of them are as “deep” as each other. He is able to concentrate on the more intimate conversations, paying less attention to the superficial ones.

June and Melissa both confirm the necessity of multi-tasking, especially with the seemingly inexorable demands of graduate school. Melissa takes a second to enjoy the aroma of freshly baked bread emanating from the kitchen in Subway before answering. “I do multi-task. I have a friend in Virginia and I often will talk to him at the same time that I’m talking to a friend in Ohio.”

I ask her if she thinks it detracts from the conversation.

“It detracts from doing work,” she laughs. I laugh too, surprised that she has given almost the exact same answer to the question as June had a few days earlier.

“The only way it would detract from the conversation,” she continues, “is if I’m not able to answer both people in a timely manner. It might seem like I am ignoring one person,” a thought echoed by both Bridgette and Kaitlan, who try their best to limit multi-tasking because they believe it detracts from conversation. “I always get distracted,” Kaitlan tells me, “my friends can always tell when I am doing something else. I could pull off multiple conversations, for sure...but I get distracted by books, art, things around the house.” Likewise, Bridgette tries to stay away from multi-tasking, especially simultaneous conversations. “I used to do the multitasking and it wasn’t working out.

That's why I started using away messages," she says, reminding me that she used an away message to discourage incoming IMs while she was chatting with me online.

Barry though, either feels multi-tasking doesn't distract from conversations, or he doesn't mind if it does. Sitting in my office talking, he tells me to "hold on one minute" while he turns on his laptop, responding to an IM a friend had just sent him. To myself I think that maybe multi-tasking does detract from conversation.

Conversation Topics: Disclosing vs. Chatting

For all participants, conversations on IM range from superficial "chit-chat" to more intimate disclosure. Melissa and Barry both classify the majority of their online talk as more superficial, day-to-day conversation, though both occasionally have intimate conversations online. For them, typing out long stories and details is a tedious practice – one in which emotion is easily lost – so they'll often save the more serious conversation for f2f meetings:

Barry: on IM i may give what i call 'the sportscenter version': just the highlights of the story

A few days earlier, Melissa made a similar point:

LittleGirl55: just being face to face is the best way to communicate. On IM, I want to be concise, so long stories or intricate details about what happened, or how I feel, will usually get left out of the conversation because I don't feel like typing them.

The conversation comes to a close and I thank her.

LittleGirl55: no problem, it was my pleasure

I hear the sound of a door closing as her name disappears from my list of contacts.

Chad too, tells me that he prefers going out to restaurants or bars to have f2f conversation. He enjoys talking with his hands and making gestures, which is impossible in the text-based world of IM. Indeed, as we sit here in Starbucks I almost feel guilty asking him questions, for each time I do, he has to put down his cup of coffee in order to emphasize points with his hands. Additionally, when IM conversations become emotional, such as talking about an important event at work or an argument he got into earlier that day, he prefers switching from IM to f2f conversation.

The same holds for Barry, who will switch from IM to f2f or phone conversation when broaching what he considers “serious” subjects, such as romantic relationships or health or school issues. This, however, is not to say that participants never have deeper conversations online; all admit to at least occasionally having personal discussions over IM. Scott even estimates that 30-40 percent of his online communication is more personal. As Barry has also told me that he occasionally uses IM for personal conversation, I ask him for a specific example. It catches me off guard when he tells me he has had a break-up over IM. I can’t help but chuckle a little as he calls her a coward and explains the end of the relationship:

Barry: i had called and text-messaged her for a couple of days and got no response. finally, she found me online and said she wasn’t ready for a relationship. of course, i was like ‘you couldn’t say this face to face, or at least on the phone?’

I tell him I understand, but that his is not the only instance I have found of personal issues being discussed over IM.

Barry: good point, I’m looking forward to our meeting next week.

Mike: yea, me too, see ya then.

As Barry's example highlights, personal disclosure is a vital part of IM communication. In fact, many researchers agree that relationship talk frequently occurs in IM conversation (Beach & Bruce, 2002; Lenhart, Rainie and Lewis, 2001; Schiano, Chen, Ginsberg, Gretarsdottir, Huddleston, & Isaacs, 2002). And, as researchers have argued, users may feel more comfortable talking about personal issues in the faceless world of CMC (Kendall, 2003; Markham, 1998; Sheeks & Birchmeier, 2007; Turkle, 1995). Thus, Barry's girlfriend sought the comfort of IM communication as a way to assuage the awkward feelings that accompany a breakup. But, while some need IM as a buffer for intimate conversations, not all participants do.

June, for example, has no problem having intimate f2f conversations. In fact, as the interview progresses, I feel my questions are becoming perfunctory. If they were to get lost in the buzzing of the lawnmower trimming the library grass, I doubt it would stop her from telling me about her use of IM. But, she explains, many of her husband's friends are not as comfortable with f2f disclosure as she is. For them, IM mitigates shyness, allowing for more personal disclosure. She tells me that some of them will IM her specifically to talk about a burgeoning romantic relationship, something they would never do in f2f conversation. This reminds me of something she said in our IM interview.

JuneBell: they can be more honest chatting than talking f2f because no one is staring them in the eye, which is more personal. Talking through technology is less personal, more distant, but can allow more honesty to come through.

"Yes, but don't those topics from the IM conversation come up the next time you are together in person?" I ask.

“Never. Why would it? I mean it just doesn’t come up. Maybe that’s why they talk to me and not to other people,” she replies. “No one is looking at you, judging you. It’s like going into confession: writing an honest note, putting it out there and knowing that no one is going to judge you,” she says as she packs up her bag and gets up from the bench outside the library, checking her watch once more to see if she can make it to work on time.

Scott also addresses this paradox – that IM is at the same time personal yet distant. He says, “It’s like you’re just typing to a screen, so u don’t have to deal with tone, eye contact, etc. Plus, you can have a few minutes to gather your thoughts, so you feel like u can be clearer. But really, it probably is worse because you are ignoring certain parts of the traditional communication process, and it’s easier to gloss over what someone else says and just focus on what you’re typing.” Scott raises some interesting points. One, that, although IM is a synchronous form of communication, the speed of the turn-taking may discourage active “listening.” However, the nature of the turn-taking, perhaps, contributes to the facilitation of intimate disclosure. Participants can take the time to re-read and re-vise messages before sending them, which, Scott points out, enhances clarity. Additionally, with the absence of another individual – and thus eye contact, tone of voice, etc. – participants may be encouraged to divulge more personal information.

Philip makes similar points in his discussion of the intimate, yet impersonal, nature of online communication. “I have tendency to stumble over words on the phone, and I get a little anxious. Through AIM I can take my time and really articulate what I need to say in an appropriate fashion.” He tells me that, in the past, he has used IM as a

tool for relational development, saying, “One of the best aspects of IM is not having that face to face conversation, there is a disembodied feeling. I felt I could go in-depth about personal topics. I felt more willing to share my past, my experiences, how I feel about things. So really no topic was off limits.”

Recently, though, he tells me that he has preferred having conversations about more intimate conversations f2f rather than online. “Online, there is no physical connection, and it gets tiring staring at a screen. I value that personal connection with someone in the discussion of intimate topics, experiencing that 'naked feeling' with them in real life. Let myself be vulnerable in the moment.”

Philip’s explanation of online communication as potentially conducive to personal disclosure in the early stages of a relationship is reminiscent of two examples that Bridgette told me toward the end of our interview. Both stories highlight the important role of personal disclosure in online communication. I asked her if she had any final thoughts on IM as tool of interpersonal communication. She said, “I think that it’s got good points and bad points. I think that when it’s a relationship that’s already established, it can be a good thing because it can allow that relationship to move into a little bit more intimate mode. You know, it’s easier for people. I have a friend who’s really weird about saying, “I love you” because she just wasn’t brought up that way, her family doesn’t even say it. But she felt comfortable saying “I love you” in IM, and now she’s much more comfortable with it. But I think it can be a bad thing when you’re first getting to know someone, especially in a dating situation because sometimes I think people get too intimate too fast. And I think you form opinions about people based on this whole IM exchange you’re having. Like when you get in person with that person,

it's this weird kind of thing that's hanging over you and you don't always talk about it. It's very intimate and then you kind of get personal. It's kind of awkward."

Again, it seems the facelessness of the medium is conducive to discussions that may not have occurred in f2f interaction. Similarly, Chad mentions certain conversations that have occurred on IM that he believes would not have happened f2f. Unlike June and Barry, these are not conversations about romantic relationships – though he has done this too – but rather the spreading of gossip. While he does not like to gossip in person, he admits to having done it on IM.

We chat for a few more minutes as he finishes his drink and drops it in the near by trash bin. I thank him for his time as he walks to the door. He turns and he smiles, "Good luck writing your paper."

Chapter 5: Looking Back: Instant Messenger as a “Fluid Space”

Conducting these interviews was an enlightening process for me. I especially enjoyed meeting each participant for the f2f interview, and comparing this persona to the one I first met on IM. With June, Melissa, and Barry the transition was very easy. The confident, loquacious June I envisioned in my head during our IM interview was very similar to the one who met me outside library. Melissa, the reserved, intelligent woman who found me at the table in front of Subway had exuded those same qualities in our online discussion. And Barry, who was outgoing and jocular in our online meeting had these same qualities that day I talked to him in my office. Bridgette and Kaitlan, who were both bubbly online, using emoticons and lots of “laughter” (i.e., “haha,” and “lol”), were just as friendly and light-hearted when I sat down with them in our f2f interviews. Philip was a little scattered brained in person, but very good natured, as I could have guessed from his late arrival at our online session. Likewise, Scott, who was reflective in our online discussion, and seemed very confident and direct, was also very contemplative and intelligent when we met f2f.

Perhaps the only outlier was Chad, who seemed more comfortable in our online meeting than in our Starbucks encounter. Online I found him to be confident – almost arrogant – and intelligent and well-spoken. As he sat down across from me in Starbucks, he seemed more nervous and less sure of himself than I had envisioned him to be, though he did appear to adjust as the conversation continued.

Overall, I conducted two interviews apiece with these 8 graduate students. The initial interview was online, with a follow-up interview in person a few days later. I believed this format might ease participants into a conversation with me, my lack of physical presence in the online interview perhaps making them feel more secure and comfortable talking about their relationships, especially to a researcher. To an extent, I believe this is true. I gained valuable insight into the relational lives of my participants, and how IM functions as a tool for relational maintenance. However, I believe this online interview also had some unintended, unexpected consequences. First, participants tended to focus more on instant messenger as a medium of communication, and less on the relationships maintained through it. Though I cannot say positively, I wonder if I had conducted the first interview in person, perhaps participants would have talked in more depth about their personal relationships. Secondly, as IM is conducive to short, rapid turn-taking, many of my participants' responses felt like "sound bytes," brief encapsulations of larger concepts. In asking follow-up questions, I was wary of leading participants into saying what they thought I wanted to hear, which can produce "untruthful answers" (Warren & Karner, 2005, p. 123); at the same time, I got the impression that they felt my follow up questions, prodding for more detail, were redundant.

Additionally, I believe conducting an initial online interview influenced the conversation in the follow-up f2f meeting. Specifically, where I wanted to use the f2f interview to elaborate on some key points such as relational maintenance, I think participants, again, felt this to be redundant. As such, they would tend to give a short recapitulation of their answers from the online interview, as if that answer was already

correct and inclusive, and there was no need to expand. I, on the other hand, wanted them to elaborate on that answer because, as I stated above, the answers I received in the IM interview seemed to be inhibited by the medium itself. By the time we met in person, though, these responses were the ones that participants adhered to.

So although it offered a unique interview frame, the use of IM was somewhat inhibitory as a research tool. I think this is one area in which future researchers can learn from my experience. If extensive detail and personal narratives are what the researcher wishes to elicit, I think f2f conversation may be more conducive.

In writing up my findings, I have highlighted some of what I perceived as the most striking patterns to emerge during the interviews. These pertain to the categories of *Time Online*, *Who is Chatting?*, *IM Filtering*, *Multi-tasking*, and *Conversations*. In the analysis I tried to give a sense of how each participant experienced and dealt with these issues from his/her unique perspective.

All participants had what they considered intimate conversations on IM, but there were differences from person to person in how intimacy was understood; for June it meant chatting with her husband's friends about their romantic relationships, while for Barry, intimate translated as his own "romantic" discussion online (which in his case consisted of being dumped!) This raises questions about the nature and varieties of intimacy as a relational experience within this particular generation of IM users. Do all participants experience intimacy in the same way? More specifically, to what extent do participants base their definitions of intimate interactions in terms of what is being expressed – the topic of conversation, and to what extent on the medium in which it occurs?

Weingarten (1992) offers the following definition of intimacy: “Intimate interaction is defined as occurring when people share meaning or co-create meaning and they are able to coordinate their actions to reflect their mutual meaning-making” (p. 47). Meaning, she explains, can be conveyed with symbols, or writing, and, through these, “individuals have the experience of knowing and being known by the other” (p. 47).

Consider, for example, the case of Philip’s friend, who first said “I love you” in an IM conversation. She may have found that IM as a conversational medium – distant and mechanical – allowed her to be more intimate. While some might say that an “I love you” sent through cyberspace is not, cannot, be intimate, precisely *because* it is sent through cyberspace, Weingarten might argue that such an exchange is indeed intimate within a specific relationship context. Nonetheless, online communication may have changed the way users view intimacy as a relational concept.

In the eyes of some participants, IM seems to be a way of compartmentalizing feelings of intimacy, so as not to have to deal with them “in real life.” Saying “I love you” to a 3 inch by 3 inch box on the computer screen is not as emotionally risky as it is in person. Online, a response lacks the eye contact, tone of voice, facial expressions, etc. that can make to the f2f expression one’s emotions difficult. Online, one may feel less likely to be judged by another. Online, a rejection can only come in a short text message. Thus, IM may make for a “safer” emotional experience, one that – if, indeed “I love you” is met with rejection – is significantly less traumatic than a f2f discussion.

By having the conversation over IM, users can converse about issues that need discussion, but take comfort in knowing they will not have to discuss the issue in f2f conversation. Remember June, who often had online conversations with her husband’s

friends about their dating lives. She explained to me that these conversations stayed online; they “never” came up in person. She even went so far as to compare the medium to a church confessional, the ultimate form of conversational compartmentalization. Words spoken in confession are left in that room, long after participants leave. Is IM a similar kind of space, one conducive to compartmentalized conversations? June explained that, for her, issues discussed online do not arise in the next f2f meeting. Scott was less sure. He admitted that conversations held online can “hang over” participants’ heads the next time they meet in person. Despite some users’ efforts, compartmentalization may not always be possible, at least not in every instance, or every relationship.

Another reason why participants preferred IM is convenience. IM made for an easy fit into the busy schedule of the graduate students, especially to keep in touch with friends. Even though the frequency of contact and typical conversational topics obviously varied from person to person, I think, overall, IM use plays a unique role in the lives of graduate students, for two reasons. First, graduate students are likely to relocate geographically, at least once or twice, sometimes even more. Thus, the real-time exchange of IM, as well as the ability to be constantly signed into one’s account, provides increased availability to chat with friends who are geographically distant, sometimes even in different time zones. These include high school and undergraduate friendships. As Barry said, “I think it’s helped me maintain some friendships I would’ve let fall by the wayside.” And June, who is completing her PhD work, uses IM to stay in touch with friends in California, where she earned her undergraduate degree. Thus, the frequency of

relocation among graduate students, coupled with the long distances separating them from friends, makes IM an important tool for graduate students to maintain relationships.

Secondly, the heavy demands of graduate work often result in diminished free time. IM is one way of keeping in touch with friends despite the temporal demands of a graduate program. Chad, for example, told me of fellow graduate student friends, who, though at a different university, experienced the same lack of personal time as himself; Barry admitted he was grading student papers while chatting online with me; and, as June succinctly lamented after spouting off a list of her daily activities, “I’m doing a lot of stuff.” In effect, IM communication is one way to balance the heavy amounts of work and personal relationships. Of course, participants admit that IM conversations often do not receive all the attention they should, simply because there is so much else to be done. Thus, papers are written, homework is graded, and emails are sent while an IM conversation is in progress. Indeed, multi-tasking is integral to the use of instant messenger. Balancing work and relationships, then, is one way that graduate students make use of IM programs.

Another way they do so is filtering, or sorting incoming IMs to manage online availability. Some participants use away messages, others just ignore incoming IMs, and some go through periods where they don’t sign online for a few days. In a sense, IM filtering is a powerful form of metacommunication (Bateson, 1972). Ruesch and Bateson (1968) proposed that messages carry multiple orders of information and they emphasized the importance of attending to both “content” and “relationship” aspects. Viewed from this perspective, filtering, rejecting, and even accepting incoming messages are implicit statements about the relationship between the receiver and the sender. So, June, who has

a screen name to which only her husband has access, communicates accessibility (to him) – in essence, *I only want to talk to my husband right now* – when she signs on with that screen name. The same idea is applicable to the rest of my participants, who all filter IMs in one way or another. One method, leaving up an away message, creates the pretense of being busy; but chatting with, say, two people while that message is up, is a strong indicator of how the user views those two people (and/or topic) with whom he/she is chatting. In fact, metacommunicative messages seem to permeate the world of IM, as suggested in Clark's study of teenage girls (2005). While interviewing them about IM, Clark found that girls will deliberately postpone responding to a message, depending on the sender's social status. Chatting with popular girls warranted a slight intentional delay in response time (so the user would not appear too eager), while chatting with unpopular girls resulted a less calculated response, whether immediate or extremely delayed (in both cases the user places no value on how the other girl views her). Thus, response time, like IM filtering, is a strong meta-message, though the message is not always apparent to the person with whom the user is chatting.

While I found all of the above to be very interesting, the most striking finding to me emerged during discussions about online conversations. In most cases, there seemed to be something of a paradox regarding online intimacy. That is, participants noted a tendency for intimate issues to be more easily discussed over IM; at the same time, though, the medium of communication was described as less personal and more distant. Looking to support this paradox, I turn to the work of Tidwell and Walther (2002), who found that online communication (not specifically IM programs) tends to be more interactive, including the use of deeper, more direct questions. They define deeper using

Altman and Taylor's (1973) social penetration model, which categorizes three different layers of disclosure: peripheral, intermediate, and core. In their study, online conversations included more intimate questions, making for deeper interaction between users. Based on this finding, Tidwell and Walther claim CMC users turn to disclosure *as a means of* dealing with the less personal nature of online communication.

Additionally, the paradox reminds me of the work of Markham (1998) and Kendall (2002), who, in their ethnographies of online discussion forums, found that different users experience online communication differently. For some, it may simply be a pragmatic means of sending messages. For others, though, communicating online is just as real, can be just as personal and intimate, as f2f communication. In essence, Markham and Kendall argue that online communication is as personal as the users make it. For many of my participants, this is exactly the case. IM communication offers them a space in which intimacy and disclosure are easily achieved. Remember Scott, who told me that IM communication can be more intimate because the user doesn't have to deal with eye contact and tone of voice. And there is June, who told me her husband is more comfortable talking about personal issues online because "no one is looking at him, reading his body language." Online he can write more honestly.

This finding by itself – that users are often more comfortable in an online environment – is not novel. But, at the same time that participants were making these claims, they also admitted that the online communication is inherently less personal.

Again, this claim is supported in much of the research on online communication (Cummings, Butler and Kraut, 2002; Kraut and Attwell, 1997; McQuillen, 2003; Parks and Roberts, 1998; Riva and Galimberti, 1998). Cummings, Butler and Kraut (2002),

and McQuillen (2003) compare f2f to online communication, finding that former is inferior to the latter. They even report that “relational strength” is higher in relationships maintained via f2f and phone communication than in online relationships. And McQuillen argues that people are encouraged to be more deceitful online because of the nature of the reduced cues environment. Online communication, he explains, allows users to deliberately misrepresent themselves. As such, like Riva and Galimberti (1998) before him, he concludes that true interpersonal communication is often neglected in online conversations:

(T)he idealized perception of the receiver created by CMC does not make the communication more psychologically personal, nor does it make it more accurate. In fact, CMC permits, or even encourages, true infidelity or inaccuracy (i.e., the message does not validate the self concept of the sender, it obfuscates it)” (p. 621).

While this research is valuable, I believe it is polarizing in that it dichotomizes online and offline communication, as well as taken-for-granted notions of what is considered “personal” as opposed to “impersonal” conversation. I think the reason why disclosure can flourish at times is precisely because of the so-called impersonal dimension of online communication. Without the eye contact, tone of voice, and other immediacy cues, participants felt more confident in tackling personal subjects and expressing intimate emotions. Often, these emotions would have been more difficult, perhaps impossible, to discuss in a f2f environment.

To dichotomize, then, is to trivialize the nature of online relationships. As Jones (2002) explains:

Nearly all research that has looked in detail at this relationship has found that the vast majority of people who engage in computer mediated communication regard it as an extension (McLuhan, 1994) of their ‘real-life’ social interactions rather than as separate from them, that, far from propelling users into ‘cyberspace,’ the effect of CMC is more often to ground them more firmly within their existing material communities and circumstances (p. 9-10).

Jones argues that most research into CMC is inhibited by the notion of “virtual reality” as a distinctly different element than “social reality.” Research that places the two in opposition to one another, as competing worlds which are never to converge, is severely limiting (p. 9).

I think, then, that the binaries of personal-impersonal and good-bad are too simplistic to encompass the dynamic nature of online communication. The participants in my study seem to use instant messenger as more of a fluid space, shifting from intimate disclosure to superficial chit-chat in their online conversations as easily as they move from online communication to f2f communication in their daily lives. That is, IM communication is not exclusively and inherently less intimate, or bad, for personal relationships. It is a space where the absence of nonverbal cues can be conducive to intimate disclosure, but, at the same time, participants recognize and correct for the lack of immediacy that comes with IM communication.

Thus, IM use can be simultaneously personal and impersonal, intimate and distant. While paradoxical, I think this is simply the nature of the medium. It offers participants a one-on-one connection with a friend from anywhere in the world, but does so in a manner that strips away everything but their words – the eye contact, tone of

voice, facial expressions, etc. Through this process, participants often feel comfortable with personal disclosure. As Melissa told me, “Sometimes there are things that I might be shy and embarrassed to say in person, but I’ll say it on instant messenger.”

Future researchers may want to explore the varieties of disclosure via IM. Can all such disclosure be characterized as intimate? Or is there such thing as “impersonal” disclosure? One way of approaching this topic might be a discourse analysis of IM conversations. Simpson’s work (2005) uses a discourse analysis of IM conversations as a means of understanding conversational floor, or turn-taking (who gets to speak, and when) in SCMC; a similar inquiry into the understanding of relational intimacy might be fruitful. Studying people’s talk, says Deborah Cameron (2001) is “not an end in itself, but a means for studying other aspects of their lives” (p. 145). That said, a discourse analysis might yield enlightening results about how relational intimacy is negotiated through IM.

Furthermore, researchers may want to consider how disclosure via IM has affected what online users consider “intimate” (if it has at all). Do users feel what I seem to sense? That they are “trading off” intimate f2f communication in favor of more disclosive exchanges in the distant, sterile environment of IM communication? And are these ways of “doing relationship” in the context of IM inherently less satisfying than more traditional enactments – or are they just different?

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