

Literature Review: Teen use of Instant Messaging

C. Michael Pedersen

San Diego State University

DIGITAL LANDSCAPE OF TEENS: INSTANT MESSAGING

While text based online communications are nothing new (e.g. web pages, e-mail, chat rooms, etc.) the introduction and increasingly wide spread use of Instant Messaging (IM), specifically among teens, is an emerging trend worth further investigation. The PEW Internet Project Report (Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin, 2005) indicates a nearly 25% increase in the number of teens using Instant Messaging since 2000, up from 13 million to 16 million. Of these teens, 48% report using this form of communication on a daily basis. With no discernable gender differences found in the pattern of regular Internet usage (Gross, 2004, 640) the increase in IM usage by teens of both sexes is substantial when compared to other age groups. Shiu and Lenhart (2004, 11) found that 62 % of members of Generation Y (currently 18-27) use IM as their primary form of online communication, almost twice as much as members in the next highest group Gen X (currently 28-39). The intent of this literature review is to focus on why teens are using this form of online communication, what aspects make it appealing, what the usage patterns are and how parental concerns factors into the digital landscape of teens.

What is IM software?

Before delving into the specifics of teen IM usage, it is important to briefly define IM. IM is a computer software application which enables users to carry on synchronous communications (e.g. chatting) with one or more people at any given time. Most modern IM software is now able to connect to a variety of different software clients and lets users create multiple screen names. These screen names are used to connect with other people by maintaining a personalized “buddy list” of friends. This list allows users to monitor the online availability of other “buddies”, leave

messages and block unwanted messages from other IM network users. In short, IM software is a low cost, browser based way for people to stay connected with each other.

Social Appeal of IM for teens

Research by Grinter and Palen (2002) found a major contributor to the popularity of IM is related to a strong desire among teens to increase their opportunities for socialization. The ability to continue conversations and connections beyond the school campus afforded by IM have blurred the line between online and offline communications (Herring, 2004, 34). The “cool” factor of being online and privy to inside jokes and gossip of ones social circle is another reason teens tend to gravitate towards IM (Lewis and Fabos, 2005, 486-487). With most online groups formed by teens mirroring their offline relationships coupled with the sheer popularity of IM usage, teens can face significant social pressure to be readily available online or risk potentially frustrating the peer group (Grinter and Palen, 2002, 3-4).

Lewis and Fabos (2005) found that the use of IM allows teens to maintain a higher level of control over their social interactions. The surveillance features embedded in IM software clients allow users to see who is and is not available at a given time, and provides the ability to block communications from unwanted people. Additionally, users of IM have more time for careful construction of specific messages by using font sizes and colors to express emotion, as well as delay tactics which traditional face to face communication do not easily allow (Lewis and Fabos, 2005, 487-489). A more subversive tactic such as making others wait for a response, can be used to remind others of their social level as well as give off the impression of being more popular in an attempt to increase a teen’s social status (Lewis and Fabos, 2005, 487).

Convenience Appeal of IM

As the cost of Internet bandwidth has decreased and more browser based IM communication methods have been developed, significant numbers of teens have flocked to IM as their preferred method of online communications (Herring, 2004, 29-30). The busy academic, athletic and family schedules coupled with the sometimes restrictive social opportunities, IM can be used to overcome these barriers by allowing for conversations to take place outside times traditionally available to teens (Grinter and Palen, 2002, 4). The ability to socially engage with friends online while in a private setting during various late hours is also appealing (Gross, 2004, 646). The results of the survey conducted by Lenhart, Madden and Hitlin (2005) found 80% use IM to plan offline meetings with friends. This use of IM removes the complexity involved in many-person coordination (Grinter and Palen, 2002, 5).

Teen IM Usage Patterns:

Nearly 50% of teens report using IM on a daily basis, with 30% indicating using IM multiple times a day (Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin, 2005, 16). Gross (2004, 646) found most teen IM conversations “devoted to fairly ordinary but intimate” topics such as friends and gossip.

Although research indicates that over 1/3 of teens (36%) have less than 25 buddies, there is a substantial number (21%) who have between 100-200 buddies. This would seem to conflict with the dominant theory that teen online peer groups mirror their offline groups, however, recent research has also shown that 39% of teens communicate with a group of five or fewer friends on a regular basis (Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin, 2005, 18).

Similar to telephone answering machine messages, IM software allows for users to post away messages. Frequently, these messages are used to express identity and remain open to receiving messages while the user is away (Lenhart, Madden, and Hitlin, 2005, 20). Away messages are also used to justify being away from their computer for those teens whose continual online availability (outside of school) is expected by their peer group (Grinter and Palen, 2002, 9).

The term “posing” refers to the practice of an IM user pretending to be someone else by using a different screen name or someone else’s account (Lewis and Fabos, 2005, 491). The most common reason given for posing is pretending to be older or to play a joke on their friends (Gross, 2004; Lenhart Madden, and Hitlin, 2005). While some reports indicate only occasional instances of posing (Gross, 2004, 643), others show a substantial increase in the number of teens who admit to engaging in this deceptive practice (Lenhart, et. al., 2005, 19).

A discernable correlation between the increase in age and the change in IM usage is evident as teens grow older (Grinter and Palen, 2002, 5). However, research by Shui and Lenhart (2004) found that 35% of Gen Y users of IM spend more than an hour a day compared to 22% by Gen X, the next highest group. The purpose and style of IM communications and peer group makeup changes as teens move from high school to college. The close offline peer group communication is often replaced by a longer distance communication with friends and family (Grinter and Palen, 2002). The style and purpose of communication tends to change based on the increased flexibility in a college student’s schedule which allows for shorter communications that result in impromptu offline connections. This increased freedom however, can lead to an addictive abuse of IM. Research on college students’ IM usage found that 68% use IM at least 30 minutes every

day with 11% using IM for more than 3 hours per day. This study also discovered that 47% of these students had postponed sleep while 10 % had even skipped work to continue “chatting” (Lee and Perry, 2004, 405-408).

Parental Monitoring

It was found that teens with less freedom in their social life were more likely to use IM to stay connected to people online (Lewis and Fabos, 2005, 487). Unlike phone calls during dinner time or late in the evening, IM is less intrusive to the family environment (Grinter and Palen, 2002, 7). While 61% of parents say they monitor their children’s usage of the Internet, including the frequency of their online communications, only 38% of their children stated their Internet habits were monitored (Wang, Bianchi and Raley, 2005, 1253). Some teens even admitted using IM to hide the frequency and duration of their online communications from their parents and some even use abbreviations such as POS (parent over shoulder) to further prohibit their parents from understanding the content of their communications (Lewis and Fabos, 2005, 492).

In spite of the research that has shown most IM connections occur with people “met off the Internet” and over 80% were with friends or best friends met in school (Gross, 2004, 642) there is still significant parental concern over teen online safety. Many parents worry that their children may be exposed to pornographic material, potential predation and cyber stalking (Wang, Bianchi and Raley, 2005, 1249). Parents have also voiced concerns surrounding the digital traces left by all online communications potentially leading to a loss of privacy (Herring, 2004, 33).

Conclusion

The literature reviewed for this paper has shown that usage of IM among teens is growing. It is easy to see how the convenience and socialization attributes of IM have made it the preferred communication method utilized by teens. The research appears to indicate that teens are relatively safe using IM because of the direct connection with an offline peer group however it is not without potential risks. As the distinction between a teens online and offline persona blurs the dangers of sharing too much information online can increase. The rapid change and adoption of new technologies by teens, combined with a significant level of peer pressure and desire for socialization can quickly lead to a wide spread adoption of alternative online communication methods. With the increasing popularity of blogs and virtual hangout websites such as MySpace and Xanga, parents and teens must deal with the potentially increased risks of cyber stalking and privacy concerns. Continued research is needed in order gain perspective on the rapidly evolving digital landscape of teens.

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