

THE WIDESPREAD USE AND VARIED GRATIFICATIONS  
OF INSTANT MESSAGING AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council  
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by

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by

Jerry White

2006

## **DEDICATION**

To my late father, Harley Reed White. Even though he disliked computers with a passion and never really understood why I was so fascinated with their impact on the way the world communicates, he was very proud of my graduate work and would have enthusiastically read every word of this thesis.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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I would also like to thank my daughters, Jennifer and Stephanie, my inspiration for this thesis. Their incessant attraction to instant messaging worried me to no end and piqued my interest in the topic. The research outlined herein – and the obvious evidence of their development into beautiful, well-adjusted young women – have put me at ease. No father could be prouder.

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## **CHAPTER I**

### **INTRODUCTION**

They go by names like eaglenum4, chugalugs90 and lwaustin. They are logged in all hours of the day and night, typing into a computer keyboard in an abbreviated language that uses acronyms and symbols and often bears little resemblance to English. They are the users of instant messaging, a form of computer-mediated communication. The activity is so commonplace that users coined a self-generated verb to describe their activities: they are I-M-ing.

Instant messaging is the generic name for computer software that allows for “real-time” text communication between users. The text is typed into a message box that is sent via a specific network (America Online, Microsoft and Yahoo! are three primary sources). Users log in using handles, or pseudonyms and they can store the handles of their friends in “buddy lists,” which allow for quick access to their network of online acquaintances. An instant message is delivered, as the name implies, within seconds of being sent. If the recipient has activated the program, an alert pops onto his or her computer screen with a notification that a message from a particular sender has arrived. If the recipient chooses to respond, he or she types a response that is delivered, again within seconds, to the original sender. Users of instant messenger programs can also set “away” messages, notifying senders that they



are not at their computer or are doing other things. Users also can use instant messaging programs to transfer music, photo and text files.

The software is free and can be downloaded on any computer that has unfettered administrative rights. New users are asked to register. During registration, new users are asked to provide basic demographic information and choose a unique handle or screen name.

Instant messaging is far different from e-mail. When using e-mail, users send messages, files, etc. to each other asynchronously. An e-mail sent from a student to professor does not require the professor to be sitting in front of a computer to receive it, or to even have his or her computer turned on. The in-box concept allows for incoming mail to be stored and checked at the recipients' convenience. Instant messaging requires each participant in an online conversation to have his or her computer turned on and the software running to receive a message. If the computer is off or the software is not running, the message cannot reach the intended recipient.

IM conversations often consist of short entries, sometimes only a few characters long. That shorthand has yielded its own "language" of short acronyms. According to the Dec. 22, 2003 edition of *Advertising Age*, 10 of those definitions had become so commonplace among computer users, they were added to the Concise Oxford Dictionary. Among them were "LOL" (laughing out loud) and the :) (happy).

The technology behind instant messaging was first developed in the 1970s but it did not reach widespread diffusion until America Online offered it to subscribers in the early 1990s. People who paid to access the Internet with AOL could also send short, real-time notes to other subscribers. In November 1996, a company named

Mirabilis introduced instant messaging free on the Internet. Not long after, Yahoo! and Microsoft Network released their own versions of the free software. Eventually, AOL opened instant messaging up to non-subscribers (Slatalla, 1998). The real-time appeal of instant messaging fueled its diffusion, especially among younger Internet users. By 2003, AOL reported 195 million people a day used instant messaging, and that was just their version of the software. Those users generated 1.6 billion messages a day (Quain, 2003). By 2005, the main providers of instant messaging altered the basic platform and allowed for users outside their networks to communicate with each other (AIM users could talk to Yahoo! users, etc.). It was a move tantamount to one cellular telephone provider allowing its numbers to be dialed by users of another.

The software is diffusing to the workplace as well in a trend driven largely by a new generation of workers entering the job market after passing through adolescence using instant messaging. The workplace diffusion includes both the private and public sectors. Staffers at the Texas State Capitol use IM to communicate with each other during busy Legislative sessions. It is also used in Congressional offices. Instant messaging was the medium at the center of the abrupt 2006 resignation of U.S. Representative Mark Foley (R-Florida). Foley's resignation came after revelations he had used instant messaging to send sexually inappropriate messages to House pages. Because the messages were sent on government computers, the conversations were archived and considered open records.

Instant messaging providers make money by selling ads that display in the control panel and pop onto the screen. The ads are matched to the users' demographics. They tout things from skin cream to online dating services. Because

advertising is priced by the size of the audience, the greater the number of users of a particular instant messaging network, the greater the price of the ads. This formula has forced providers of instant messaging to continue improving the reliability of their networks and increase the features offered online. Voice chat allows users on computers equipped with microphones to talk to each other via the Internet. Video chat allows users with computers equipped with webcams to see each other during the conversations. The lucrative advertising formula has also fostered greater competition. In 2006, MySpace, an online community targeting college students, introduced their version of instant messaging software.

Another innovation allows users of instant messaging software to forward their messages to cellular telephones or other wireless devices. This melds the ease of instant messaging with the portability offered to cellular users.

### **Way of Life**

According to a quantitative online study and a series of focus groups conducted for this thesis, instant messaging use among college students is a way of life. Of 305 respondents to an online survey, 92 percent identified themselves as instant messenger users.

One focus group member said, “In high school and middle school I used it a lot and I talked a lot and it was before I had a cell phone. And, so, late at night, when your mom’s like, ‘Get off the house phone’ you’re like, ‘fine, I’m getting on the computer then.’ And now at college, I guess it is getting bigger, because everywhere you go it’s like, ‘Do you have a handle?’ It isn’t like, ‘What’s your number?’ It’s like, ‘Are you online?’”

## **Study Objectives**

With its rapid diffusion and overall appeal to adolescents and young adults, much has been written about the use of instant messaging. Much of the previous research has focused on the negative impact that overuse has on its young users. That research tended to sound a warning to parents of teenagers about the litany of woes caused by instant messaging. These studies are described in more detail in the second chapter of this thesis. This study seeks to understand to a greater degree what users get from the use of instant messaging. It will rely on quantitative data gathered by means of an online survey posted in the groups section of MySpace.com. It also relies on qualitative data gathered during a series of focus group discussions with university undergraduate students.

The data can serve several purposes. First, it will help provide a broader foundation for the companies that host instant messaging platforms by providing additional information from the perspective of its most critical demographic: college students. Second, it should help illustrate an opportunity for improved internal and external communications for employers. The benefits of instant messaging espoused by the students in these surveys are benefits, which, if applied in the workplace, could foster improved internal and external communications. This information could further fuel the diffusion of instant messaging into the workplace. Thirdly, this survey will offer insight for the users themselves into the norm of instant messaging use. What is the norm when it comes to instant messaging use? How do others use it? How often? Do other users feel guilty from overuse? From other users' perspectives, how much is too much? Finally, this survey can offer valuable demographic information about 18-

24 year olds (the most common age range among respondents). This information can better help advertising and marketing companies target them with ads they need and messages they are likely to respond to. This can extend to public service agencies that are seeking to reach this audience to discuss life-saving issues ranging from the spread of sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS to techniques for staying safe on area lakes.

### **Organization of Thesis**

The thesis that follows is organized into five chapters. The first chapter is an overview of the topic and a brief history of instant messaging and its diffusion. The second chapter is a review of scholastic research into instant messaging. It also includes an explanation of diffusion and a sampling of literature into the theory behind this thesis: uses and gratifications. Chapter three will focus on the methodologies used to gather data for this paper's hypothesis. It outlines the details of the publication of the online quantitative survey. The chapter will then discuss the methodology used to gather participants in the series of focus groups and how the focus groups were conducted.

Results of the two parts of the study will be shared in chapter four. The quantitative results will be analyzed. The trends identified in the focus group discussions will also be detailed.

The fifth chapter will summarize the research results. The conclusions yielded from the research will be discussed. The studies' shortcomings will also be detailed. Finally, suggestions for further research into this topic will be suggested.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### **Diffusion**

“Diffusion is the process in which an innovation is communicated through certain channels over time among the members of a social system.” That definition by Everett M. Rogers is in his book, *Diffusion of Innovations* (1995). About the time the fifth edition of the book was being published, instant messaging was diffusing among a growing, worldwide Internet audience.

#### **Uses and Gratifications Theory**

The uses and gratifications theory focuses on the audiences’ use of the media and the gratifications received from those uses (Becker, Schoenbach, 1987). The theory has its roots in the 1940s when Herta Herzog examined the impact of radio programs on the audience. It further grew in prevalence when Paul Lazarsfeld used it to study of popularity of radio quiz programs (Eighmey, McCord, 1998). Both outlined motives for audience loyalty to those programs. In essence, the researchers asked the question about the audience, “What are they getting out of this?”

In 1959, Elihu Katz summarized uses and gratifications research by urging that the question shift from, “What do media do to people?” to “What do people do with the media?” (Severin, Tankard, 2001). Katz would later join with other

researchers to enumerate 35 needs fulfilled by the media and categorized them into five categories (Severin, Tankard, 2001). They are:

- Cognitive needs – acquiring information, knowledge, and understanding;
- Affective needs – emotional, pleasurable, or aesthetic experience;
- Personal integrative needs – strengthening credibility, confidence, stability and status;
- Social integrative needs – strengthening contacts with family and friends;
- Tension release needs – escape and diversion (Katz, 1959).

That same question has been applied to a variety of media through the years. Alan Rubin used it to study television in the 1980s and 1990s (Rubin, 1990). In 1993, Rubin moved from Katz' 35 needs and said that uses and gratifications research tends to reflect five assumptions:

- 1) Communication behavior is goal-directed or motivated;
- 2) People select and use communication sources to satisfy needs and desires;
- 3) Social and psychological factors mediate communication behavior;
- 4) Media compete with other forms of communication for selection;
- 5) People are usually more influential than media in media-person relationships (Perry, 1996).

In essence, Rubin states that audience members will not use a specific medium unless they get something out of it and that the level of satisfaction they receive from that medium will determine whether they use it again. He further states that many other factors determine that level of satisfaction: social, economic, ethnic, etc. Rubin further states that in modern world of sophisticated media competition,

providing that satisfaction is the key for media growth. Achieving satisfaction among audience members builds loyalty and delivers audience for the advertisers who are seeking exposure (Perry, 1996).

All of the studies based on uses and gratifications assume that audience members actively seek out a specific medium because that medium fulfills some need (Eighmey, McCord, 1998). That is the primary research question of this thesis: what need or needs does the use of instant messaging meet for college students?

Despite criticisms of its reach, the uses and gratifications theory has evolved through the years. Contemporary champions assume three things: media selection is made by the individual; expectations for media use are determined by the users' predispositions, social interactions and environmental factors; and audiences are active and have a purpose in their use (Ruggiero, 2000).

The uses and gratifications approach has been applied to new media – and instant messaging, but to a limited degree. A 2005 study used a quantitative survey of 602 instant messaging users found that among the reasons the technology was used by college students was for social utility, convenience and relaxation. The survey did not include a qualitative examination of users.

Uses and gratifications was also at the center of a 2001 study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project. The authors, Lenhart, Rainie and Lewis, found then that 13 million teenagers use instant messaging and that the technology has a key place in many of their lives. The authors found that instant messaging had become a growing way for them to visit with friends and combat boredom.



## Introduction and Growth

Several studies tracked the increase in popularity of IM in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 2001, two researchers at the London School of Economics and Political Science, referenced the growing popularity of instant messaging in a report on families and the internet. Livingstone and Bovill (2001) wrote of the burgeoning medium:

“Both email and chat room contacts as well as, primarily, face-to-face contacts can spin off into Instant Messaging (IM). Being a form of one-to-one communication with people one knows, this typically involves more detailed and intimate content. For those who have it, even before email, IM is the first thing they want to check out. However, more routinely, IM is mainly used to provide company during one’s otherwise solitary Internet use. This kind of multitasking is highly pleasurable and can revolutionise (sic) dull homework.”

Shiu and Lenhart (2004), in another study for Pew on the use of instant messaging by Americans, found that nearly half of Internet users between 18 and 27 years old use IM more than e-mail and that more than one in five of them log in several times a day.

The diffusion of instant messaging continued at an especially heightened rate for adolescents and young adults, according to Flanagin (2005). He found that instant messaging is becoming a more popular and more important means of “computer-mediated communication” among teenagers. His study found that the largest demographic using this technology is college students. One of the key findings of

Flanagin's quantitative study was that college students preferred instant messaging because it allowed them to multitask and that instant messaging was showing signs of displacing e-mails.

### **Nature of Conversations**

The nature of the conversations themselves was the focus of the study by Baron (2004). In it, she sought to develop a "linguistics profile" of college students who use instant messaging. She counted "turns" – each individual exchange in conversations. She also counted the words in each turn. With that information, she sought to find out whether there are gender differences in IM use. She found only a few: the conversations by females tended to include more words and females took more "turns" typing responses when they spoke to each other.

### **Downsides of Instant Messaging**

The downsides of IM use – especially its overuse – also have been the topic of several studies.

Addiction on IM and the impact it can have elsewhere was the focus of Lee and Perry (2004). They found that heavy use, a lack of self-regulation of IM use can lead to a dependence on the medium and lack of self-control in other aspects of college students' lives.

Finn (2004) found that 10 to 15 percent of students in his study had received IM that they perceived as threatening, insulting or harassing.

Some heavy users are driven toward depression, studies have shown. Morgan and Cotton (2002) found that there was a tie between depression and certain types of Internet use among college students. They found that students who used chat rooms

and IM more were less depressed. Students who used the Internet to shop or play games were typically more depressed.

Green, Hilken and Friedman (2005) found that even though people may be drawn to IM because of its “ease, lack of risk, and immediate gratification,” overall, these interactions may be less rewarding long term. The authors found that students did not appear to be substituting Internet use for other forms of extracurricular engagement, but to augment it. However, IM use was associated with feeling that one used the Internet too much, and with reduced life satisfaction.

Valkenburg, Schouten and Peter (2005) found that more than half of the adolescent IM users surveyed had lied about their identity online to see how other people would react, overcome shyness or help build an online relationship.

The motive for use of IM was included in the study by Gross and Gable (2001). In it, the authors found that adolescents who reported that they had few close friends in the “real world” were more likely to use IM as a way of socializing than those who said they had many close friends.

In 2002, Grinter and Palen conducted a qualitative survey of 16 teenage IM users. The researchers found that use of the technology was emerging as a force in American teen life. The authors found that there was a difference in use motives between high school teenagers and college teenagers. That was driven largely, the authors wrote, by the difference in autonomy levels from high school to college.

The use of instant messaging also transfers “control” of the conversations to the users. This control fulfils the need for autonomy among many teenagers, Grinter and Palen wrote. They wrote:

Out from under the watchful eyes of parents, college students worry less about inadvertently advertising their use of IM at non-traditional times. They also have much more flexibility about when they can meet face-to-face with friends, and may find that they rely less on IM communications for social congregation. Growing obligations to their academic work might require that they address access regulation differently.

Stated more simply, more maturity and freedom from parents, is likely, in many cases, to ease instant messaging use.

### **Research Questions**

Instant messaging seems ubiquitous on college campuses. It is the way friends stay in touch with friends, teachers communicate with students and businesses reach younger demographics. It has redefined e-mail – thought of in the 1990s as the fastest form of computer-mediated communication – as a slow-moving ancestor.

This thesis explores the scope of diffusion among college students and seeks to apply the uses and gratifications theory to that use. It asks:

- 1) Why do college students use instant messaging? How does this form of communication compare with others?
- 2) What do they get from their use? What needs are served?
- 3) Has instant messaging changed the way college students interact and view each other?
- 4) What are the implications in growing diffusion of instant messaging for communicators, employers and for users?

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Quantitative Online Survey**

To find out how common instant messaging use is among college students and to delve into the gratifications that come from that use, an online survey was created using the survey service, SurveyMonkey.com. Once created, a link to the survey was posted on MySpace.com, an online community site that targets college students as its primary audience.

#### **Survey Questions**

The survey used for this portion of the research consisted of 19 questions. Because the goal was to measure response among students, the first question was a qualifier to differentiate college or university students and others. Those who answered yes to this question were guided into the rest of the survey. Those who answered no were directed to a page thanking them and then exiting from the survey.

The next four questions were aimed at gaining basic demographic information about the respondents. They were asked for: their student classification at their colleges or universities; the name of the college or university; their gender; and their age.

Question six was, “Do you use instant messaging programs like AIM or Yahoo! Messenger?” Respondents were asked to answer “yes” or “no.” Again, logic was applied so that respondents who answered “yes” were guided into the rest of the survey while those who answered “no” were thanked and the survey ended.

Question eight asked respondents, “Why do you use instant messaging?”

These possibilities were listed as possible answers:

- Stay in touch with friends;
- Stay in touch with family;
- Transfer files;
- I use it at work.

Respondents were allowed on this question to choose as many answers as were applicable. They were also allowed to enter an answer not included in the list by entering it into a text field contained within the survey. Their text responses were stored by the software and available for use by the researcher.

Question nine was “Have you ever used instant messaging to transfer files?”

Respondents were allowed to pick one answer: yes or no.

Question 10 asked, “If you had to pay for instant messaging, would you continue to use it?” Again, respondents had to pick either yes or no.

Question 11 dealt with length of use, the topic of several previous research studies. It asked, “How many hours a day are you logged into instant messenger?” Thirteen answers ranging from “less than an hour” to “more than 12 hours” were listed.

Question 12 was aimed at soliciting a self-described benchmark for instant messaging use among college students compared with their instant messaging use while

in high school. It asked, “Please describe your use of instant messaging when you were in high school.” Seventeen answers ranging from “Never used it” to “More than 12 hours a day” were included.

Question 13 and 14 dealt with lack of self-regulation of instant messaging by asking “Have you ever skipped a college class to use instant messaging?” and “Have you ever postponed studying to use instant messaging?” Yes and no were the possible answers to both questions.

Question 15 sought to rank instant messaging in relative importance when compared to other forms of communication. The question asked, “Which is your preferred way to communicate with friends when face-to-face communication is not possible?” Possible answers were: U.S. mail; land line telephone; voice cellular phone; instant messaging; e-mail. Respondents were allowed to pick one answer.

Question 16 asked, “Do you believe your use of instant messaging has increased, decreased or stayed the same since you’ve been in college?” Possible answers were “increased,” “decreased,” and “stayed the same.” Respondents were allowed to pick one answer.

Question 17 asked, “If you could keep only one item on this list, what would it be?” Answers were: television; land line telephone; cell phone; instant messaging. Only one answer was allowed.

Question 18 and 19 dealt with cell phone use among instant messenger users. They were asked, “Do you own a cell phone?” and “Do you use your telephone or some other wireless device to send and receive text messages?” Respondents had only two options for answers, yes or no.

## **Posting the Survey**

SurveyMonkey.com describes itself as having “a single purpose: to enable anyone to create professional online surveys quickly and easily.” For a fee, users create accounts and are guided through a process of creating surveys that can then be distributed via a Web link. Questions can be constructed with varying degree of logic. For example, if a survey respondent answers “yes” to a qualifying question, he or she will be directed to a different set of questions than a respondent who answers “no.” Once the account is created and the survey is constructed, the user can enable the survey to go live and distribute the link to recipients using a push technique such as e-mail or in a pull technique such as posting it on a trafficked Web site. Respondents who click on the link are guided through the questions one at a time. The responses from others taking the survey are hidden. The SurveyMonkey software places a cookie, a small computer file, onto the computer of the respondent. The software checks for the file before allowing a respondent to answer the survey. If the software finds the file in the respondent’s cache folder tied to his or her browser, it will not let that person take the survey again. While this system can be defeated, it prevents the casual computer user from taking the survey over and over to skew the results. The software gathers the responses and makes them available to the account holder in a password-protected results section. Results can be analyzed using a variety of formulas provided by SurveyMonkey.com or downloaded in a spreadsheet format that is compatible with other analysis software such as SPSS.

Once the survey was constructed, it was posted on SurveyMonkey. No introduction was included. The survey was constructed so that respondents who clicked



on the link would be guided immediately to the first qualifying question. Respondents were allowed to choose not to answer any specific question and to move forward in the survey. Respondents were not allowed to skip ahead to questions or go back to questions already answered. Respondents could not see each others' answers or the overall survey results. The questions were displayed in black 16-point standard font on an orange-tinted background. No graphics were included on the pages. All pages of the survey were titled, "Instant Messaging Survey."

A link to the SurveyMonkey survey was posted it was posted on bulletin boards in 56 college or university groups on MySpace between May 14, 2006 and Sept. 18, 2006.

MySpace.com is a social networking Web site that allows for members to create personalized Web pages, blogs, photos and videos that are shared with others in the network. The site claims that it has 106 million accounts (Freeman, 2006). One feature of the site is user groups. Members are allowed to browse through the thousands of groups (or use the site's search engine) to find a community of people with similar interests. Once a community is found, MySpace users can subscribe and post messages to other members of that same group. Some groups are geographically based. Some are based on college or university enrollment. Some are based on interest, such as admiration for a certain sports team or music group. Some groups have closed membership where a proctor must grant permission for users to join. Other groups have open membership where no permission is required. Those groups allow non-group members to post notices on their "bulletin-boards."

The instant messaging survey was placed on college-centric bulletin boards on MySpace. Not all colleges or universities that had such groups on MySpace were included in the survey. The bulletin board items were titled, "Thesis help needed: Take this survey on instant messaging." The text of the postings read, "Please take this short online survey." A link to the SurveyMonkey survey was included. Because you must be a registered user of MySpace to post notices in bulletin boards, and because respondents have the option of visiting the poster's MySpace page, the researcher created a page that contained only the photo of his dog, a rottweiler.

The survey was closed on Sept. 18, 2006 after collecting 465 responses. People clicking on the link after that date received a message explaining that the survey had closed.

### **Qualitative Focus Groups**

To develop further insights into use of instant messaging and to gather quantitative data for this thesis, three focus groups were conducted. Subjects in these focus groups were students at Texas State University-San Marcos in San Marcos, Texas. They were chosen from a pool of students enrolled in an Introduction to Mass Communication class with approximately 300 students. Even though the class is a communications course, students with a variety of majors take it because of its introductory nature. Most of the students in the class tend to be freshmen or sophomores. The professor teaching the class allowed a researcher to explain the nature of the focus groups to the class on Sept. 12, 2006. As an incentive, volunteers were granted one absence-forgiveness by the professor if they agreed to participate. Enrollment sheets for each of the three planned focus group sessions were at the front

of the class. Students were asked for their names, e-mail addresses and cell phone numbers. Once the 10 names were included on each of the three sheets, the volunteer window was closed.

The first eight names on each of the enrollment sheets were chosen to participate. They were notified by e-mail several days before each group. The volunteers were directed to meet in the lobby of Old Main on the Texas State campus at 6:45 p.m. on Sept. 19, 20 or 21, 2006. They were told the groups would then move to a classroom or other suitable meeting place and that the discussions would likely last approximately 90 minutes.

Participants were promised that they would be identified in research findings only by their first name and general demographic information. They were asked at the beginning of the session to complete a short questionnaire to gather that information and to obtain basic information about their use of the Internet in general and instant messaging programs in specific. They were asked basic demographic information: name; e-mail address; age; instant messaging handle; ethnicity; gender; and classification in school.

They were then asked:

- Do you use instant messaging?
- Did you use instant messaging in high school?
- Compare your instant messaging use now to when you were in high school.
- On average, how long are you logged into instant messaging each day?
- Have you ever skipped a class to use instant messaging?

- Have you ever postponed studying to use instant messaging?
- Have you ever postponed sleep to use instant messaging?
- Do you consider yourself addicted to instant messaging use?

These questions were designed to parallel the questions asked in the online survey to allow for at least general comparisons between the online respondents and the participants in the focus groups.

Once the questionnaire was completed, the students were told again about the general nature of the study and its context in this thesis. Then, students were reminded that the group session would be tape recorded and asked to identify themselves by their first names before they gave a response to allow for easier transcription. The participants introduced themselves to the researcher and to each other and the group session began.

### **Qualitative Survey Questions**

The researcher asked each participant the same question in order. The participants passed the recorder from one to another as the questioning continued. The first two focus groups took place in the graduate lounge on the building's second floor. Participants sat on couches or chairs and the researcher sat on a chair near the door. The third focus group took place, at the participants' request, on benches outside the building with some participants sitting on benches and others and the researcher on the ground.

The discussions generally followed a list of pre-determined questions. They were:

- Please describe your Internet use;

- Please describe your use of Instant messaging;
- Please compare your use of instant messaging now to when you were in high school;
- Compare instant messaging to e-mail. Compare instant messaging to traditional mail.
- Which would you rather use, instant messaging or cell phone text messaging?
- Do you feel safe using instant messaging?
- Do you ever feel guilty because of your uses of instant messaging?
- Do you think it is possible to become addicted to instant messaging use?
- Does instant messaging help or hurt socialization?
- What is the future of instant messaging?

Some responses from the students merited clarification or amplification and in those cases the researcher deviated from the scripted questions. Also, at several points during all three of the focus groups, participants asked each other questions or responded to each other's answers.

Eight students attended the Sept. 19 focus group. Five attended the Sept. 20 and Sept. 21 focus groups. Each session lasted approximately 75 minutes.

## **CHAPTER IV**

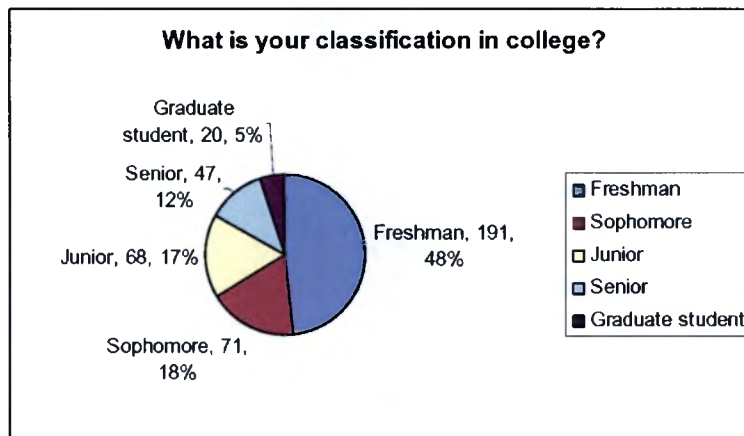
### **RESULTS**

#### **Quantitative Results**

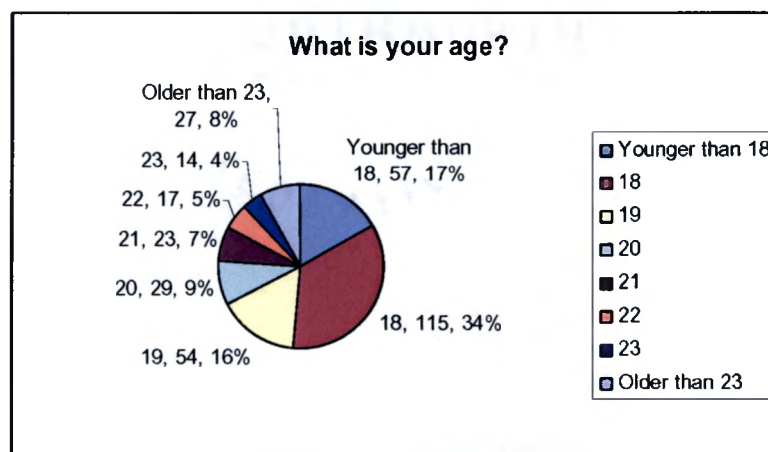
The online survey described earlier in this thesis was posted from May 14, 2006 to Sept. 18, 2006. In that time, the survey link was activated 465 times. Of those 465 respondents, 404 answered positively to the first question, “Are you a student in high school or a student in a college or university?” The other 61 were thanked and routed out of the survey. The results described in this section focus on the 404 respondents who identified themselves as students in a college or university.

Specific demographic information on this pool was sought in the survey. Respondents were asked for their gender. The pool leaned heavily female with 200 of 340 respondents identifying themselves as female and 140 identifying themselves as male. The others chose not to answer that question.

Nearly half (48 percent) of the survey respondents were college freshmen, followed in order by sophomores, juniors, seniors and grad students.

**Figure 1: College classification**

Respondents were asked for the name of their university. Answers ranged from colleges and universities across the United States. Respondents were also asked for their age. Three out of four respondents were between the ages of 18 and 23. Eighteen years old was the most common single response with 34 percent.

**Figure 2: Age**

Respondents were asked whether they used instant messaging programs such as AIM or Yahoo! Messenger. More than 9 out of 10 (92 percent) said they did.

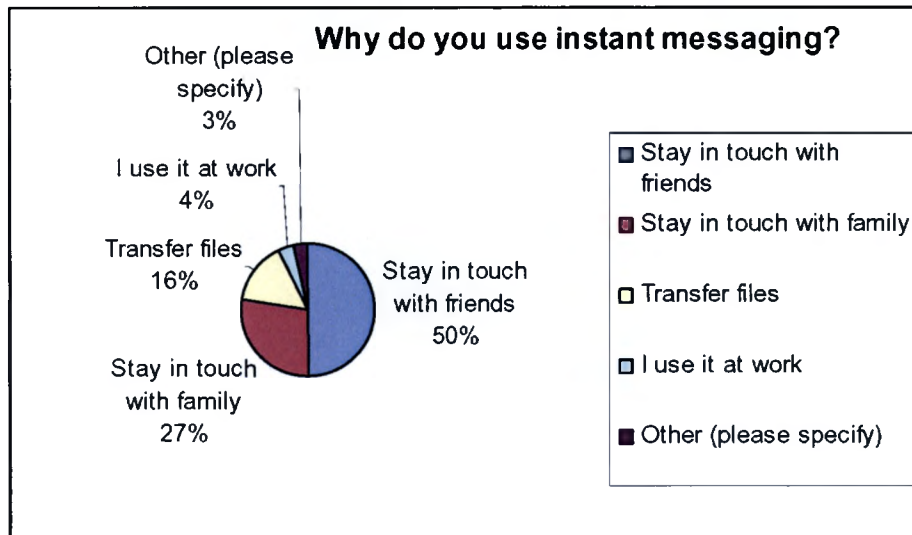
Respondents were asked how long they had used instant messaging. While answers ranged from less than a year to more than 10 years, the vast majority of the respondents (91.8 percent) had used instant messaging for three years or more. The most common answer was six years.

**Figure 3: Length of use**



Respondents were asked why they used instant messaging. They were given four possibilities and “other” -- the opportunity to enter information into a text box. Of the 303 who answered this question, half said they used instant messaging to stay in touch with friends. Another 27 percent said they used instant messaging to stay in touch with family. Twenty respondents (3 percent of those who answered this question) opted to enter answers not included on the list by entering information into the “other” field. The answers from the other field included, “find out missed assignments,” “cybersex,” “Just to chat, much less expensively than the phone,” “get commissions from clients and communicate with fellow artists,” “meet new people,” “meet new friends,” and “get naked pictures of people.”



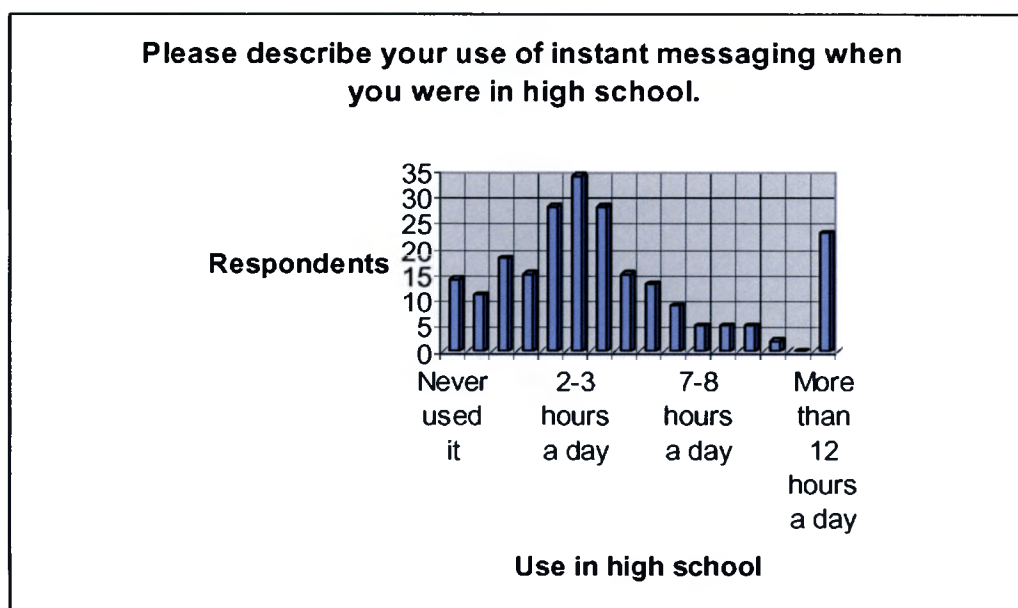
*Figure 4: Reasons of use*

Respondents were asked if they used instant messaging programs to transfer data files. Just over four out of five (81 percent) said they had.

A majority (82 percent) of the respondents said they would discontinue using instant messaging if they were required to pay for it.

Respondents were asked, “How many hours a day are you logged into instant messenger?” The most common answer (58 percent) among the 300 who answered this question was “More than 12.” That means almost three out five respondents say they are logged into instant messenger for 84 hours a week. And 86 percent are logged into instant messaging for at least an hour a day.

Respondents were asked, “Please describe your instant messaging use when you were in high school.” Of the 298 respondents who answered this question, 85.6 percent said they used instant messaging at least daily in high school. Of the other respondents, 4.7 percent said they never used instant messaging in high school.

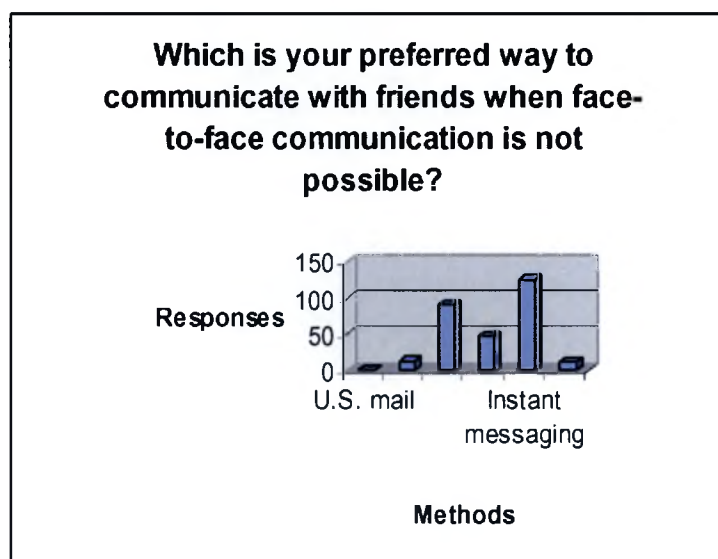
**Figure 5: Use in high school**

Respondents were asked if they ever skipped a college class to use instant messenger. Of the 289 people who responded, only 6 percent said they had ever skipped a class to use instant messenger.

Then respondents were asked if they had ever postponed studying to use instant messenger. Of the 294 respondents to this question, almost four out of five (78 percent) said they had.

Respondents were asked, "Which is your preferred way to communicate with friends when face-to-face communication is not possible?" More than two out of five (43.6 percent) said instant messaging, the most common answer. Only 12 respondents (4.2 percent) said chose e-mail. No respondents chose traditional U.S. mail.

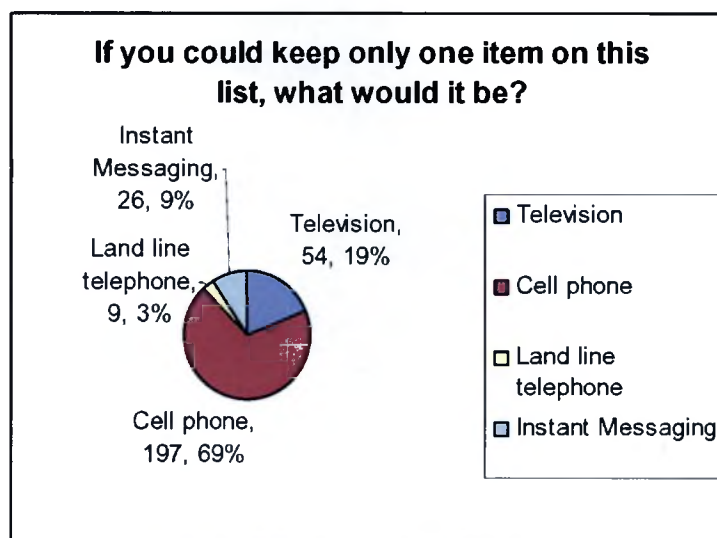
**Figure 6: Preferred method of communication**



Next, respondents were asked to measure whether their use of instant messaging had increased, decreased or stayed the same since entering college. More than two out of five (41 percent) of the 286 respondents who answered this question said that their use had increased. That was the most common answer. One-fourth said it had decreased. About a third said it had stayed the same.

Respondents were asked, “If you could keep only one thing on this list, what would it be?” Their choices were: 1.) television; 2.) land line telephone; 3) instant messaging; and 4) cellular telephone. Cell phones were the top choice with almost 7 out of 10 of the 286 respondents. Next came televisions with 19 percent. Land line telephones was the most seldom chosen with 3 percent of the respondents. Almost one out of 10 respondents would give up televisions, land line telephones and cellular phones to keep instant messaging.

**Figure 7: Convenience preference**



Respondents were asked if they owned a cell phone. The vast majority (95 percent) did.

Respondents were also asked if they used their cellular telephones to send and receive text messages. More than four out of five (82 percent) of the 283 people who answered this question said they did.

### **Demographic of Focus Groups**

Eighteen students at Texas State University–San Marcos participated in the three focus groups that were conducted in September 2006. Participation leaned heavily female (17 of the 18). The average age of the participants was 19.7 years. The most common age was 18. Thirteen of the eighteen participants described themselves as white, one described herself as “Mulato,” one as Asian-American and three as Hispanics. There were nine freshmen, five sophomores and four juniors.

Seventeen of the eighteen said they use instant messenger software. Sixteen of the eighteen used it in high school. Four said they use it in college about the same

amount that they used it in high school Four said they used it in college less than they used it in high school. Ten said that they used it less in college than they did in high school.

None of the participants said they skipped class to use instant messaging but sixteen of the eighteen said they postponed studying to use it and sixteen of the eighteen said they postponed sleep to use it.

Sixteen of the eighteen described themselves as extroverts; two of the eighteen described themselves as introverts.

Six of the eighteen said they had at least once pretended to be somebody else while logged into instant messaging.

Three of the eighteen said they considered themselves addicted to instant messaging use. Nine of the eighteen said they know someone they consider addicted to instant messaging.

### **Use Discussion**

While seventeen of the eighteen focus group participants use instant messaging, the amount of daily use and the number of years that they have been using it varied.

“I log on daily, maybe a couple of times a day and spend a couple hours pretty much every day,” one freshman said.

“I’m a freshman here and I log on in the morning and log off before I go to bed,” said a focus group member named Shelly.

Several other group members stayed logged on to instant messaging all day. They cited the ability to multitask while connected to instant messaging. Because

users can set the software to make a sound or flash a screen when a new message arrives, focus group participants talked about the ease of keeping the software running while studying, talking on the phone or watching television.

“I use it every day. I don’t really log off. I just stay connected to it and just put up away messages whenever I’m not using it,” said a sophomore.

“I’m always on the Internet, like constantly,” said a freshman.

“I use instant messaging a lot because I don’t like to talk on the phone so that’s what I do instead of talking on the phone so I can talk to more than one person at a time,” said Chelsea, a freshman.

A sophomore said, “I get on MySpace and I look at trashy tabloid Web sites. Whenever I get on the computer, my IM is up.”

Others are more self-regulated.

“I’m a freshman and I’m on the Internet a lot, too,” said Kaitlyn, a freshman.

“But I don’t log on in the mornings. I just log on when I get back from classes and I just kind of leave it up. If someone wants to talk to me they can.”

Maggie, a sophomore, said, “In high school and middle school I used it a lot and I talked a lot and it was before I had a cell phone. And, so, late at night, when your mom’s like, ‘Get off the house phone’ you’re like, ‘fine, I’m getting on the computer then.’ And now at college, I guess it is getting bigger, because everywhere you go it’s like, ‘Do you have a handle?’ It isn’t like, ‘What’s your number?’ It’s like, ‘Are you online?’”

### **Comparison of Use in High School**

All of the focus group participants started using IM while in high school or middle school. But when comparing the time they spend using IM now to the time they spent in high school – specifically, do they use it more now or when they were in high school -- the groups split.

“I used to IM a lot when I was in high school and it kind of wore off through the years,” Maggie said. “I’ve been in college for about two years. This is my third year. But I really don’t use it that much. I mean I’m not a MySpace junkie. I don’t even have a MySpace page. But as far as IMing goes, I am on Yahoo! every now and then, not a whole lot. Just to keep up basically with friends from back home.”

Jenny, a freshman, said, “I used it since probably like middle school, maybe even before that because I always had AOL. But like now that I’ve been at college, I use it a lot more because now everyone’s like all over the state and all over the country and I can keep in touch with everybody.”

### **Contact Tiers**

Several focus group members said IM offers the opportunity to place their acquaintances in hierarchical levels of communication. There are close friends whom they frequently see in person and have face-to-face conversations with. There are more casual friends who are still considered close but are not seen regularly so they stay in touch via telephone. And there are a large number of people with whom the members of the focus groups want to stay in touch, but only on a superficial basis. To the end-users, that tier system and the ability to slot people into it is one of the appeals of instant messaging.

“I use instant messaging a lot because I don’t like to talk on the phone so that’s what I do instead of talking on the phone so I can talk to more than one person at a time,” said Jenny. “It’s so much easier to do that than it is to talk to people on the phone.”

Megan said, “A lot of people maybe that I communicate with I wouldn’t have their phone number necessarily, they are more like acquaintances that I talk to on instant messenger. You don’t have to get to that awkward point where, ‘Well, I don’t want to talk to you on the phone.’ But with instant messenger you can send whatever message you want and you don’t have to be embarrassed about what you’re saying. You can just be open.”

### **Fewer Inhibitions**

Several members of all three focus groups said it was easier to be more witty – and confrontational – in an instant messaging conversation than one that takes place in person or on the telephone.

“For me, I don’t like having arguments face-to-face, but I can bitch someone out so fast on instant messaging,” Maggie said. “It’s so easy. It’s so impersonal that you can say like anything and like not really care. You don’t have to look into someone’s eyes. There’s really no emotion to it. You can say whatever you want pretty much.”

Chelsea said, “You don’t have to look at them and say what you’re thinking because sometimes it’s hard for people so you can just say what you feel. But with IM, it’s easier.”



Amanda agreed. “I think emotionally it makes you more extroverted because you have the anonymity,” she said. “You’re looking at the computer screen. You’re not looking at another person. But I think in the long run it hinders socialization because you get so used to being extroverted over the computer that when you see a person face to face you do lose some of that. You lose some of your extrovertedness. You’re not able to communicate so well because you’ve gotten so used to just typing and telling them that way.”

Ashley agreed.

“It gives you a little more time to think of clever responses,” she said. “If someone says something, you don’t have to immediately say something. If you’re on the phone, it’s like, ‘Oh man, what do I want to say?’ and you wait for 10 seconds and then say something really clever. When I type I come across as so much more funny and so much more clever.”

Several focus group members said instant messaging also allows for them to instantly communicate their mood or the status of their day immediately to their friends. When they experience a bad day, they post that in their away message. When friends message them, they see the news and offer consolation.

### **Welcome Distraction**

Several members of the groups said that instant messaging provides needed, yet sometimes unchecked, distraction from other duties.

One group member said, “I’ll go back when I need to study and I’ll go, ‘Well, I can check my MySpace or IM real quick.’ Then it will take an hour.”

Chelsea said, “Last year I would go to study for finals and stuff and I made the mistake of actually bringing my computer with me and I don’t think I ever studied once. I mean, I would just sit there and get on Facebook or talk to people on IM -- to like anybody -- just like because you have a computer right in front of you so you might as well.”

A second group member named Chelsea said, “I have definitely postponed studying just to be on the Internet and just do random stuff because I get sidetracked very easily. I’ve never skipped class to be on the Internet because I bring my laptop to class and whenever the teacher rambles off on something that’s when I just bring IM back up and just look at it until the class is over.”

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

#### **Instant Messaging as a Way of Life**

The companies that host instant messaging networks, such as America Online, Yahoo! and now MySpace, have created a growing audience deeply reliant on their product. This thesis sought to measure the use of instant messaging among college students and to examine the reason for that use. The results of both the quantitative and qualitative research show that instant messaging use is, in fact, ubiquitous among college-aged students. It is the preferred method of communication when face-to-face communication is not possible. It has changed the way students communicate. It has changed the way students socialize. It has changed the way students acquire and share information. It is, in many ways, the epitome of diffusion.

Rogers wrote that, “Diffusion is a kind of *social change*, defined as the process by which alteration occurs in the structure and function of a social system. When new ideas are invented, diffused or adopted or rejected, leading to certain consequences, social change occurs.”

That is what has occurred with instant messaging. It has changed the way young people in this country live.

### **Why do Students Use Instant Messaging?**

As discussed in the literature review, Katz and his colleagues enumerated 35 needs fulfilled by different media. Data from these studies show all 35 are met in one form or another by instant messaging. Cognitive needs are met when users gain information about their friends and families or, in some cases, from an employer. Affective needs are met when users are soothed after posting an away message detailing a particularly bad day. Inclusion on someone's buddy list offers a type of social credibility and status and can build confidence. Social integrative needs are met by allowing the user to have text conversations with friends and family. The diversion – although problematic when unchecked – offers escape and diversion.

### **Specific Gratifications**

All focus group members, except for the lone non-user of instant messaging, said that they used the technology to stay in touch with friends. While some said that their instant messenger use has declined in college and some said that it has increased, all said that it is still a primary method of keeping in touch.

Instant messaging is free and that is a large part of its appeal to a demographic that is often cash-strapped. More than four out of five respondents to the online survey said they would not use instant messaging if they had to pay for it. Students in the focus groups said they chose to use instant messaging to communicate with family and friends because it does not have a per-minute or per-use charge like a cell phone.

Instant messaging is easy to install and easy to use. The ability to send messages to users of other networks makes the software seamless. The abbreviated nature of the conversations speeds receipt and transmission of messages.

Many college students have grown up using instant messaging and that familiarity makes it appealing. This generation of college students is a generation of instant messaging pioneers. The technology diffused when the college students were in grammar school and was the rage when they were in middle and high school.

### **Change in Interaction**

Instant messaging allows users a level of anonymity. Several focus group members discussed the appeal of pretending to be someone they are not while using instant messaging. They said it allows for flirtatious exploration that they would never attempt in person or even on the telephone.

Instant messaging is a “pull” medium. That means that the recipient must take action to receive the message. That also means that the recipient of an instant message can be doing other things when messages arrive. This allows for multitasking that is not always possible in telephone or even face-to-face conversations.

The technology offers a sometimes mindless diversion to users. Focus group members discussed being drawn to their computers to converse with even the remotest acquaintances to keep from doing other more things, like study or sleep.

The technology allows students the ability to set levels of communication based on levels of intimacy with their family, friends and acquaintances. This creates a personalized, communication caste system: close friends merit face-to-face visits;

more distant friends merit telephone conversations; casual acquaintances or near strangers qualify for only instant messaging access.

Instant messaging is ideal for building online communities. While telephone conversations can include more than two people, a person using instant messenger can have conversations with an unlimited number of people – some or all of whom are conversing with each other. It is an extension of real-world communities established at a school or workplace.

### **Differences from Other Media**

According to the members of the focus groups, instant messaging offers a type of social security blanket that is not present in telephone or face-to-face communications. Students discussed feeling funnier and less inhibited because they were able to think about responses to questions or statements from friends before they answer. The students said that the technology allowed them to be more genuine because they were not concerned about appearance or inflection.

### **Implications for Communicators**

This study indicates that corporations, governments, politicians – anyone seeking to communicate with college students – should consider doing so either directly through instant messaging – a medium that has become so important in their lives, or through the ads that are hosted on instant messaging networks. More than nine of ten of the respondents to the online survey conducted for this survey use instant messaging. That represents a huge audience share for those seeking to communicate to that demographic.

**Implications for Employers**

With that high rate of use, instant messaging diffusion into the workplace is likely to accelerate in the not-too-distant future. As college students like those interviewed in the focus groups for this study move into the workforce, employers will continue to look for more efficiencies in the way they communicate with them. The ensuing diffusion poses significant challenges to the information technology professionals who are faced with developing not only refinements in the technology but a hierarchy of rules governing its use in a professional environment.

**Implications for Users**

The online survey and focus groups conducted for this thesis would indicate that there is no real “norm” for use of instant messaging. Some students are logged into the network all day. Others are logged in for just a few minutes at a time. Some seem more successful at self-regulation while others succumb to what they describe as mindless entertainment. Instant messaging would seemingly correlate with other media – too much use in any circumstance is bad. Some of the focus group participants discussed feeling as if they were addicted to instant messaging while in high school but have since matured past it. Others focus group members discussed learning the consequence of overuse.

**Limitations**

The methodology of this thesis, while revealing, was flawed in several ways.

The use of an online survey to gather quantitative results could not prevent tampering. Users who cleaned their browser’s cookie folder could then return and

take the survey more than once, thus manipulating the results. There is not evidence that this occurred, but it is impossible to state that it did not.

The online survey also relied upon respondents' honesty in their self-descriptions. No objective, third-party data were available.

The focus groups consisted almost entirely of women. Participants speculated that this occurred because the sign-up sheets for the groups were distributed at the front a large auditorium. The participants said they had observed that the seats closest to the front of the auditorium are typically filled by women. There is no evidence that their responses would be any different than responses from focus groups that are primarily men, but there is also no evidence that they would not. Ideally, the gender split would have mirrored the gender split in this demographic.

### **Further Research**

The online survey and the focus groups conducted for this thesis yielded results that indicate additional research is merited.

A longitudinal study of instant messaging use, beginning with users in middle school or younger and tracking their use through college, could likely provide a greater level of objectivity than asking the users to describe their own use. Such a study could use tracking software to log exact duration of usage.

Many of the focus group members discussed use of MySpace or Facebook pages. MySpace has recently been acquired by the News Corporation, a large international media company. Understanding how that company, well versed in audience growth for the delivery of advertising, will impact this widely used service is suggested.



The popularity of these sites also merit a review of how private industry and governmental bodies scramble to incorporate their messages onto these pages in an effort to reach an increasingly important demographic.

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## **VITA**

Jerry White was born in Brownsville, Texas on Oct. 16, 1959. He is the son of Harley Reed White and Lois Ann White and was the youngest of four children. White is a graduate of St. Joseph Academy in Brownsville. During high school, he edited the school newspaper and occasionally freelanced sports stories for the Brownsville Herald. He entered the University of Texas at Austin in 1978 and majored in journalism.

He was hired as a clerk at the Austin American-Statesman in 1980 and then as a reporting intern. He was eventually hired as a fulltime reporter and covered police, courts, schools and general assignments. He was state capitol bureau chief and metro editor. He received his Bachelor's of Liberal Studies degree from St. Edward's University in 1990.

In 1997, White moved from print to broadcast and took a job as planning editor at KVUE-TV, the ABC television affiliate in Austin. In 2000, He was promoted to assistant news director. In 2001, he was promoted to news and operations manager of KVUE.com, the station's news Web site. In that role he won two regional Edward R. Murrow Awards from the Radio, Television News Directors Association and several awards from the Associated Press. He was also an adjunct faculty member at Austin Community College.

In 2005, White took a job in the corporate communications office of the Lower Colorado River Authority in Austin. He supervises a team of communicators while managing projects and other initiatives.

White is a member of the Society of Professional Journalists, Investigative Reporters and Editors and Leadership Austin. He is also an advisory board member of the crime victims' advocacy group, People Against Violent Crime.