Adolescents' use of Instant Messaging as a means of emotional relief

Michal Dolev-Cohen, Azy Barak *

Department of Counseling and Human Development, University of Haifa, Israel

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Instant Messaging (IM) plays a major role in online communication, whether through dedicated software or through chat integrated in a social network's platform. IM-based online conversation enables private, synchronous, interpersonal communication while being invisible and possibly anonymous; facilitates self-disclosure and intimacy; and possesses advantageous features of expressive writing and social support. For adolescents, the use of IM is a legitimate, available, and free alternative vehicle for communicating with peers to ventilate negative emotions and to receive social support and advice. The present study examined effects of IMing friends on the emotional state of distressed adolescents through both pre-post ($n = 100$) analyses and comparison with an un-distressed group ($n = 50$). Dependent measures included self-report questionnaires, textual analysis, and expert judges' evaluations of the conversations. Findings revealed that IM conversation significantly contributed to the well-being of distressed adolescents. In addition, participants' level of introversion–extroversion moderated the degree of their perceived emotional relief, so that introverted participants profited from IMing more than did extraverts. The implications of these findings are discussed in the context of online communication theory, as well as the practical implementations for troubled adolescents.

1. Introduction

1.1. Adolescence

Adolescence—the transition period from childhood to maturity (Steinberg, 2008)—is a central developmental stage in human life. During that period, adolescents become closer to their peer group while moving away from their parents. The process of separation and individuation has been characterized as one of the most important developmental tasks in adolescence (Blos, 1979). This task is composed of two distinct yet complementary processes, in which the distinction between the "I" and the other is established. This distinction has two roles: the creation of the adolescent's independent identity, on the one hand, and the preparation for independence and family life, on the other. At the end of the process, the adolescent becomes an independent, mature person, with a unified, distinct personality (Steinberg, 2008).

The maturation process causes no little distress among typical adolescents, including emotional suffering, interpersonal conflicts, psychological stress, and various other, sometimes severe difficulties (Gould & Kramer, 2001). Typically, adolescents seek consolation and support from friends who are experiencing a similar process and may support them (e.g., Laursen & Collins, 2009).

The peer group, thus, has a central role in adolescent development, as it provides them with the emotional support resource they need, provides advice, supplies extensive relevant information for making decisions and considering behavior, and serves as a behavioral role model of great influence (Berndt, 1989; Giordano, 2003).

Adolescence, unlike other life stages, is characterized by establishing many social ties and constantly strengthening them. For adolescents, "friends" are defined mainly through mutual activities, but also through a willingness to discuss problems, give advice, provide emotional support, and share mutual areas of interest (Berndt, 1989; Hartup, 1996). Adolescents with no close friends or with only superficial friendships have reported feelings of isolation and depression and been found to tend to suffer from low self-esteem, in contrast to adolescents who have close ties of friendship (e.g., Buhrmester, 1990). It has also been found that close relationships with friends provide a kind of shield against depression during adolescence (Petersen, Kennedy, & Sullivan, 1991), as the existence of social support constitutes a significant resource for dealing with difficulties (Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1994). Social support strengthens adolescents' subjective feelings that they have the means to deal with pressing events; as a result, they experience less anxiety and loneliness in intimidating or stressful situations (Cohen & Wills, 1985). In order to expand the time that typical adolescents spend with friends nowadays, they typically harness the Internet for their needs; the computer enables them to maintain a constant connection to their peers, from their home space too.

* Corresponding author.
  E-mail address: azy@edu.haifa.ac.il (A. Barak).

1.2. Online social activities, synchronous communication and IMing

The amount of communication options that the Internet offers leads to its adoption for advancing social goals and personal progress (Antheunis, Valkenburg, & Peter, 2010; Mesch & Talmud, 2010) in such a way that users create and preserve connections with family members, friends, and colleagues regardless of geographical or cultural restraints (Haythornthwaite, 2005). This virtual activity is similar to the establishment of new social ties and to taking part in "real world" social activities and groups (Rainie, Purcell, & Smith, 2011) although online social relationships frequently exist exclusively in the cyberspace (Haythornthwaite, 2007; Subrahmanyam & Šmahel, 2011).

Synchronous communication views a conversation between two or more people as "real-time communication", meaning that it occurs when the participants simultaneously use software or a website that allows simultaneous conversation. This type of communication (chat) emerged in the 1970s, but its use began to grow in popularity from the middle of the 1990s with the launching of the *ICQ* (I Seek You) program enabling Instant Messaging (IM; Boneva, Quinn, Kraut, Kiesler, & Shklovski, 2006), followed by *MS Messenger* and a rather large number of other such programs, which introduced integrated icons and, later, audio and video features. IM chat programs enable private, synchronous communication with one or more users found in one's "buddy's list", which features a "buddy's" activity status; for example, available for conversation, busy, or disconnected. Communication via IM (IMing as it is now termed) can take place while carrying out other online or offline activities; it is possible and even normal to conduct a conversation with several friends in parallel and/or do other things simultaneously while IMing. In the past few years, as the popularity of *Facebook* and other social networks has risen, many have chosen to use built-in IM, which is integrated into network software. Some 62% of American adolescents report IMing, 32% of them doing so daily (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010).

The use of IM, especially when only texting, neutralizes conspicuous visual cues and impressions, so that interpersonal attributions and emotions become based on personal characteristics and psychological needs, the type of software people use, and the way they choose to describe themselves and manage their online identity (Barak, 2007). It is important to note that in relationships among users who knew each other previously (meaning, where anonymity or the lack of identifying signs does not exist), the fact that users do not *see* one another while communicating has a significant impact on communication partners. It seems that the lack of visual exposure, especially the lack of eye-contact, reduces the influence of labeling and physical impressions (Lapidot-Lefler & Barak, 2012). Text-based communication via the Internet invites direct, free conversation; in fact, it enables a unique situation to occur in which participants literally connect to a great extent to themselves and are less tied to social dictates. For instance, they do not stare or directly gaze, they do not speak up directly, irreversibly, or uncontrollably to their partners, and they do not examine the other's facial expressions and other body cues during communication. In fact, users are judged solely by the content and style of their words (and sometimes accompanying graphics). In a situation like this—in which it seems that participants are talking to themselves—one may expose, approach, participate, and be more personally "real" (McKenna, 2007; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002); that is, one may portray more authentic, less inhibited emotions and behaviors (Suler, 2004; Suler, 2010). It seems that exposure of the "real me" by means of the Internet is psychologically important, because it has the ability to lead to self-acceptance and a feeling of belonging, as well as to aid in the process of self-determination (McKenna, 2007).

Synchronous conversation online, that characterize IMing, tends to be more focused than non-synchronous conversation (e.g., email), thus encouraging intimacy (Hu, Wood, Smith, & Westbrook, 2004), strengthening self-presence (Bardi & Brady, 2010), and creating a sense of anonymity and nonidentifiability, all leading to rapid and expansive self-exposure (Hu et al., 2004; Suler, 2004). A study that compared communication with strangers via IM versus face-to-face conversation found that a feeling of elation took place in both situations, but that it was overwhelmingly more powerful among those who were IMing (Green et al., 2005). Moreover, adolescents find IMing more comfortable and suitable for raising personal issues that they find difficult to discuss face-to-face (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007a). Finally, and almost contradictorily, IMing was found to strengthen relationships and friendships among adolescents, as well as among adults (Lin & Chiu, 2011; Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). It appears, then, that the popularity of IMing among youth is a result of the need for social ties and interconnection even when they are alone and apart (Grinter & Eldridge, 2001; Schianno et al., 2002). The use of IM, whether conducted through computers or cell phones, grants an adolescent a relatively cheap, readily available solution from among existing communication alternatives with her or his highly necessitated peer group, especially in times of emotional need.

Additionally, textual communication has the special merit of self-expression through writing and the special effects of reading, which are intensive and magnified in virtual environments (Barak, 2007; Boniel-Nissim & Barak, in press). Written communications—not necessarily related to either computers or the Internet—contain numerous therapeutic factors, as personal expression through writing has unique ventilating and therapeutic effects (Wright & Chung, 2001). In addition to self-expression free of a partner's interruptions and comments, writing, as opposed to talking, is characterized by self-focus, encouraging self-organization of thoughts, ideas, and feelings (Wright, 2002). It seems that the therapeutic value of writing lies in ventilating emotional difficulties, self-reflection, and self-understanding, in addition to providing a less frightening modality to cope with interpersonal conflicts (Lago, 2004). Online written communication allows writers to confront traumas and difficulties that they usually have refrained from expressing to others, and perhaps to themselves, too (Pennebaker, 1997, 2003; Smyth, 1998). Research conducted in the field of expressive writing found that writing has the ability to relieve writers' distress and to contribute to their physical and emotional well-being (e.g., Pennebaker, 1993; Smith, Floyd, Scogin, & Jamison, 1997). Similar therapeutic values were found in online writing, such as in clinical interventions (e.g., Kraaij et al., 2010; Possemato, Ouimette, & Geller, 2010; support groups (e.g., Barak, Boneh, & Dolev-Cohen, 2010; Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006) and blogs (Boniel-Nissim & Barak, in press; Nagel & Anthony, 2009).

1.3. Personality differences in cyberspace

Interpersonal communication, face-to-face and online, is influenced to a great extent by a user's personality. In this context, Eysenck and Eysenck's (1975) classification of types of personality is considered relevant, especially the dimension of introversion and extroversion. People considered introverts prefer their own company over that of others, tend to be reflective, do not look for excitement, and may be perceived by others as distant. Conversely, extroverts seek social interactions and excitement, take risks, and are impulsive. Introversion–extroversion is considered a continuum, not a dichotomy, and therefore people are characterized by the degree of their introversion–extroversion. This personality trait has been regarded as highly relevant in Internet-related behaviors and experiences; for instance, it seems that cyberspace permits