



# Mobile instant messaging use and social capital: Direct and indirect associations with employee outcomes



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## ABSTRACT

This study explores how mobile instant messaging use, affordances, and social capital may directly and indirectly influence positive employee outcomes. A field survey of 245 Hong Kong real estate agents showed that their mobile instant messaging (MIM) use and affordances were positively associated with job performance, job satisfaction, and relational satisfaction, and with online bridging and bonding social capital. While bridging capital was not associated with any of the three outcomes, bonding social capital was positively related to the two satisfaction measures. However (with one small exception), neither type of social capital mediated relationships between MIM use and affordances, and employee outcomes.

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## 1. Introduction

With high adoption rates of the smartphone in many countries, individuals are now able to communicate with others, use a wide variety of applications, and access the Internet nearly any time and any place [48]. Smartphone adoption among US adults nearly doubled from 35% in 2011 to 64% in 2015 (85% among 18–29-year-olds) [73]. In particular, smartphone users can communicate with their network contacts easily via mobile instant messaging services (MIMs), a portable form of instant messaging (IM). A recent PEW national US survey shows that just over a third (36%) of smartphone owners and 29% of adult Internet users use messaging applications (apps) [21]. MIM adoption by smartphone users is much higher in most other countries [24].

These MIMs are changing [A1] the way people communicate both socially and professionally. Mediated communication with infrequent as well as close contacts can build bridging or bonding social capital, that is, different resources embedded in different kinds of social relationships [23]. These resources in turn can be used for personal and social gains, including improving employee outcomes.

Our recent search of multiple relevant research databases (e.g., ABI/INFORM Complete, Computers & Applied Sciences Complete, and PsycINFO) indicates that previous research has examined social media use and social capital, or new media use and employee outcomes. However, surprisingly, no study has empirically investigated the relationships among new media use (in particular, MIMs), social capital, and employee outcomes. Our study focuses on the extent to which MIMs are directly associated with social capital and employee outcomes, and indirectly with employee outcomes through social capital.

## 2. Review

### 2.1. Social capital

Generally, social capital refers to an individual's social relationships that provide access to resources embedded in those relationships to the individual [79], and possibly for the relevant social grouping as well. Wilken [85] briefly notes the origins and evolution of the concept of social capital. Some conceptualize social capital as primarily an individual resource [15]. Others emphasize social capital as the resources embedded in relationships (not individuals) and social structure, instead of collective assets such as norms and trust [45]. Lin assumed that individuals, motivated by personal gains, actively seek opportunities and resources by negotiating their social environments. Still others

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consider social capital as more of a “public good” although often quite local, created and shared within a network [61], as a by-product of other activities [85]. The central components of social capital are social relations and norms of reciprocity [61]. People can potentially use social capital for both instrumental benefits (e.g., information acquisition, financial gains, and job leads) and emotional support (e.g., empathetic learning and expression of sympathy) [14,36,61]. Social capital is associated with productivity and economic outcomes, as it fosters coordination and cooperation [85].

Putnam’s [61] two-dimensional model of social capital, bridging capital and bonding capital, guides much research. *Bridging capital* refers to resources embedded in social network ties that are irregular or seldom frequent, heterogeneous in backgrounds, and low in interpersonal closeness. The low expectation of relational commitments and responsibilities in such weak ties allows easy inclusion of a large number of people with different views, information, resources, and talents. More diverse personal networks are related to a wide range of benefits, including health, innovations, knowledge, and job information [66]. Bridging capital can provide individuals with new opportunities, quick dissemination of information, high diversity in content and relations, and exposure to new ideas [38,61]. Bridging capital, resulting from communicating with diverse, weak ties, affords an individual a broad horizon, new opportunities, and exposure to a variety of information sources.

By contrast, *bonding capital* lies in close, strong, and homogeneous ties in an individual’s social network. These close ties, including family members and close friends, feel a sense of relational obligation and thus reciprocate emotional and substantive support for one another [1,61]. Strong ties and associated bonding social capital provide learning resources and socialization, social influence, and contextual information. Bonding social capital involves greater trust, reciprocity, and obligations. However, bonding social capital may also exclude outsiders, encourage excessive claims and requests, limit individual choice, reduce openness to new ideas, and reinforce conformity [10,45,66,70,85].

Bridging links actors across divisions, whereas bonding reinforces identities. They are not, however, mutually exclusive; indeed, both are necessary [85]. These two types of capital, although different, can complement each other in contributing to an individual’s ability to gain personal benefits, that is, converting social capital to tangible gains. The concept of social capital is directly relevant to collectivistic cultures (including Chinese culture) due to the emphasis of social relationships in everyday interactions. For example, the young Chinese generation accumulates both bonding and bridging capital via social networking sites [13].

## 2.2. IM in the workplace: usage and affordances

Present-day organizations rely on Internet-based computer technologies and mobile phones, including IM. D’Urso and Pierce [18] observed that the growing availability of communication technologies such as IM is transforming communication practices in the modern organization, and the workforce has become tech-savvy. IM is becoming a mainstream means of communication for both work and social purposes [47]. MIMs provide easy, fast, convenient, and nonintrusive ways of connecting with people [62]. Employees regularly carry out a variety of tasks during and outside of work locations and hours via IM [74]. Such IM use is quite pervasive among working professionals in China [54]. The five general purposes of IM use are to (a) quickly communicate information, (b) obtain information during a communication with a third party, (c) reach people who may be unavailable through other media, (d) obtain information from multiple parties, and (e) obtain information quickly in order to complete a task [57]. Mobile

phones with MIMs offer a wide variety of types of usage and affordances.

### 2.2.1. Usage

Prior work has identified at least four kinds of MIM usage relevant to this study: usage, services, features, and contacts. *Overall MIM usage* pertains to cumulative or total use of various capacities of MIMs. Some of the often-examined indicators of overall usages include years of using MIMs, total hours spent on MIMs daily or weekly, number of people cumulated on the contact list, and total number of people contracted daily (see the studies by Flanagin [25] and Sheer [69]).

*Various MIM services* are available for use on smartphones. The default messaging service associated with the phone number is installed by the mobile service provider. Users can easily receive and send text messages through such MIMs [6]. In addition, users can install free MIMs provided by social media. MIM apps grew nearly three times as fast as all mobile apps in 2014 [24]. The most frequently downloaded MIM apps in 2013 were Snapchat, Facebook Messenger, Kik Messenger, and Skype.

MIMs share some common *features*. The most basic feature is texting, or transmitting mobile-to-mobile text-based messages and emoticons. These MIMs allow users to express emotions via both verbal and nonverbal channels [40]. Other common features include instant transmission of images, and video and audio files [41,88]. Users can not only communicate with others one on one but also create mobile chat rooms to engage in mediated group discussions with multiple users (e.g., see Chinese user behavior in the study by Song and Wang [75]).

*Mobile work contacts* refer to people on an employee’s mobile contact lists with whom he/she communicates about work- or business-related matters. Employees increasingly use IM at work to communicate with colleagues [26]. For example, Cavazotte et al. [9] discuss lawyers’ use of mobile devices provided by their company. The lawyers appreciated the device because it facilitated efficient communication with clients and colleagues, regardless of time and place, and increased their accessibility. Matusik and Mickel [50] interviewed employees from different occupational settings and described similar findings. These employees explained that communication technology devices helped them save time, stay connected, and rapidly respond to business partners.

### 2.2.2. Affordances

Based on Gibson’s [27] general concept of affordances, media affordances are the kinds of uses or purposes to which users can put a particular medium. Media affordances are constituted through relationships between the actors, their uses of the medium, and the features of that medium [80]. Thus, while different media have more or less identifiable features or technological capabilities/constraints, affordances depend on how an actor perceives and uses the medium. In turn, different outcomes may be associated with a particular medium depending on which affordances emerge via which actors. Mobile phones may provide a wide array of (overlapping and not well-explicated) affordances (see Refs. [7,11,12,19,29,32,49,51,54,64]). One affordance constraint particularly relevant to this study is that mobile phone users usually need to know the other person’s phone number. Thus, texting or IM is especially related to interactions with specific individuals, and not to groups, organizations, or places [8].

## 2.3. New media and social capital

Social capital is an important construct for understanding the uses and implications of new media [23,43]. Researchers have been

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