

The Meaning of Instant Messaging

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ABSTRACT

Most current research in instant messaging takes a functional or character approach to studying the medium — “what is instant messaging used for” or “what does instant messaging use look like?” These primarily “objective” approaches neglect an important class of data provided by a phenomenal approach to studying the medium — “what is it like to use instant messaging” and “what is the meaning of the medium to its users?” We developed diary study software that would prompt users immediately after an instant messaging window was closed to indicate what meaning instant messaging brought to their interaction. In this poster, we present results of this study — results that characterize the breadth of meanings that instant messaging brings to computer-mediated communication.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

H.4.3 [Information Systems Applications]: Communications Applications; H.5.3 [Information Interfaces and Presentation]: Group and Organization Interfaces — *Collaborative Computing*

Keywords

Instant messaging, computer-mediated communication, phenomenology

1. INTRODUCTION

The most common perspectives on instant messaging are relatively “objective” perspectives of character and function. A character perspective on instant messaging looks at properties of instant messaging use, such as frequency and duration, media switching, multitasking, or the rhythms of use (e.g., [4, 6]). A functional perspective on instant messaging looks at the tasks supported by instant messaging — simple/quick questions or coordination and scheduling, for example (e.g., [4, 6])¹.

A character perspective asks “what does instant messaging use look like?” and a functional perspective asks “what is instant messaging used for?” In contrast, we are asking “what is it like to use instant messaging?” or perhaps even “what is the meaning of the medium to its users?” In contrast to the character or functional perspectives, these latter questions may be viewed as indicative of a phenomenal perspective.

The phenomenal distinction is one that was made originally by Kant and subsequently by many other philosophers, notably Husserl and Heidegger. The world as we experience it, according to Kant, is the “phenomenal world.” Instant messaging, as we experience it, then, is “phenomenal instant messaging.” To take a

phenomenal perspective on the study of technology is to study through the lens of the world as we experience it, as opposed to an “objective” view of the world². For example:

If a red traffic light makes you feel impatient...that feeling of impatience is part of how you experience the light, not a separate thing from it. This is true regardless of what the actual red light is doing. Say, for example, that you’re so impatient that you start banging your head on the steering wheel. Meanwhile, the light turns green without your realizing it. Even though the red light is gone, you still have the idea of a red light in your mind, making you bang your head on the steering wheel [7].

It is your experience of the light that triggers this reaction, not the light itself.

The application of phenomenology to human-computer interaction and computer-supported cooperative work is not new (see, for example, [2, 10]). In addition, research that is conducted in the ethnomethodological tradition (e.g., [8]) can be traced back through Garfinkel [3] to its phenomenological roots.

Glimpses into a phenomenal perspective on instant messaging can be found interspersed throughout research by Nardi et al. [6]. While this research is primarily presented through a functional lens, various qualitative descriptions and quotes of participants offer glimpses into what instant messaging means to participants, for example, “[with instant messaging] you can be more quirky” or “IM injected playfulness and intimacy.” A more comprehensive study of instant messaging from this phenomenal perspective, however, is missing from the computer-mediated communication literature.

2. METHOD

As a first step in exploring instant messaging from a phenomenal perspective, we conducted a diary study. The diary study contained 3 multiple choice and 5 multiple response questions and was designed to take approximately one minute to complete. Twenty-two (22) individuals participated in the diary study; the subjects were drawn from a large computer science department in the research division of a large corporation. When the participants closed a messaging window, our diary study software prompted them to take a short web-based survey. This software allowed us to gain a users’ perspective on the instant messaging experience in the local moment of the instant message.

Diary study participants completed a survey for each messaging window that was closed over the course of an entire day or a minimum of 10 instant messages, whichever came later. For those individuals who engaged in more than 10 instant messages over

1. Additional research on instant messaging has been framed by the conventions of the medium [9] and social affordances of the medium [1].

2. We use the word “objective” here in an appeal to our readers’ likely intuitions about the word. From the phenomenological perspective, however, objectivity cannot be divorced from subjectivity, as subjectivity is said to be “inextricably involved in the process of constituting objectivity” [5].

the course of the day, 10 survey responses were randomly selected for analysis in this study, for a total of 220 diary study responses. In the diary study, we asked the participants to tell us what the medium meant to the interaction — what IM allowed or caused them to be. We also asked participants to indicate the function(s) of the instant message.

The response categories provided for the functional question were drawn from categories in previous literature [4, 6]. The categories used for the phenomenal question originated from a short list extracted from descriptive language in the Nardi et al. study [6]. This language was then augmented by open-ended responses provided by a pilot group of 6 participants over the course of one work week. The categories were further augmented to mitigate bias in two areas — we felt that there were too few negative categories and too few categories that might reflect the point of view of one who did not initiate the interaction.

3. RESULTS

From a more “objective” perspective, one might draw from the “objective” affordances of instant messaging (e.g., near-synchronicity) and hypothesize that instant messaging allowed users to be immediate or efficient. From a phenomenal perspective, the meaning of instant messaging is more multifaceted. Out of the 220 diary study surveys, some responses were not at all surprising — instant messaging did allow users to be efficient (38%) and immediate (33%). But instant messaging also allowed users to be humorous (17%), playful (14%), comforted (9%), intimate (8%), and even idiosyncratic (4%).

Perhaps even more striking, however, is the extent to which these meanings of instant messaging were reported across participants. While it is again, perhaps, unsurprising that in at least one of ten diary study responses 91% of participants said that instant messaging allowed them to be immediate and 73% of participants said that instant messaging allowed them to be efficient, it is of note that 64% of participants said that instant messaging, in at least one of ten instances, allowed them to be humorous; 55%, to be opportunistic; 55%, to be playful; 45%, to be intimate; 41%, to be distracted; and 36%, to be comforted.

It might be tempting to dismiss meanings like playful as being only associated with social talk or meanings like efficient as being only associated with work-related discussions, but our data provide evidence to the contrary. Although efficiency and immediacy were the most frequent meanings of IM reported in work-related discussions (56% and 40%, respectively), in 11% of work-related discussions, participants reported that instant messaging allowed them to be comforted. In 10% of work-related discussions, IM supported humor. In 10% of work-related discussions, IM supported playfulness. Instant messaging enabled more than just efficiency in work-related discussions.

Similarly, although humor and playfulness were the most frequent meanings of IM reported in social talk instant messages (52% and 44%, respectively), in 21% of social talk, participants reported that instant messaging allowed them to be efficient. In 21% of social talk, IM supported immediacy.

Other meanings of instant messaging were equally prevalent in both work and social conversational contexts. The ability to have a change of pace and to vent, for example, was similarly common (3-4 responses) in both work-related discussions and social talk.

4. DISCUSSION

Instant messaging allows users not only to be immediate and efficient; it allows users to be playful and idiosyncratic, humorous and intimate. This was not the result of a few select users being

playful or a few other select users being humorous. Instant messaging allowed a majority of participants to be humorous, opportunistic, playful and intimate at one time or another. In addition, these meanings of instant messaging were not just found in social conversations. Participants found that instant messaging allowed them to be humorous and comforted in work-related discussions, as well. Playfulness, idiosyncrasy, and comfort are just some of the many ways that users experience instant messaging.

As a research community, we have learned to document the affordances of a medium; we have come to document and characterize the types of work accomplished within a medium. But we have not, in general, come to study what is experienced within a medium. A richer portrait of a medium may be painted by augmenting a functional and character perspective with a phenomenal perspective.

Without an understanding of phenomenal instant messaging, the relationship between the experiential meaning of the medium and the features that support the experiential meaning are largely not understood. And without an understanding of those features, designers’ abilities to augment or change the design of instant messaging clients are impeded. After all, how does one know what subtle changes might ruin the meaning of instant messaging for its users?

This study represents the start of a research programme aimed at exploring the phenomenal medium — the experiential meaning of instant messaging.

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