

Tethered or Mobile?

Use of Away Messages in Instant Messaging by American College Students

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To appear in Rich Ling and Per Pedersen, eds. *Front Stage – Back Stage: Mobile Communication and the Renegotiation of the Social Sphere*. Springer-Verlag.

1 Defining the Problem

Since the appearance of the telegraph and the telephone, interlocutors have had options about how to communicate with one another at a distance. Typically, there is a settling-in period for new language technologies, as people gradually work out what medium is most appropriate to use with which interlocutor, and how messages should be formulated (Baron 2002). The kinds of usage patterns that emerge with new technologies are rarely monochromatic. Differences may reflect economic considerations, age, gender, education level, and cultural habits. For example, telephone usage was far more pervasive in the United States than in many other countries until well after World War II (Baron 2000). Email was largely restricted to the university community until the 1990s, and teenage use of mobile phones to send short text messages dwarfs SMS usage by older cohorts (Ling 2004).

The aim of this paper is to contribute to a discussion of cultural diversity in information and communication technologies (ICTs) used to convey writing at a distance, where choices include listservs, chat, newsgroups, email, instant messaging (IM) from laptop computers or PCs, and text messaging on mobile phones. Our particular focus is the United States, which presently relies far more heavily upon computers than mobile phones for such written communication. Specifically, we will explore how American college students use away messages (one component of America Online's instant messaging system) to negotiate social activities and relationships.

Like texting on mobile phones, away messages in IM enable users to establish a continuing sense of social "presence". That is, the away message function of instant messaging enables those posting messages to be physically mobile (even when not using a mobile communication device) because the user's social presence is maintained in his or her physical absence from the computer. Before looking at away messages themselves and the role they play in fostering both social presence and mobility, we need to understand the American computing milieu out of which they grow.

2 ICTs American Style

The United States is filled with computers that can access the Internet. By the end of 2002, more than 72% of American adults reported they had gone online within the past 30 days.¹ Of all the uses of these networked computers, email continues to top the list.² Among American teenagers, socializing over the Internet is commonly done through instant messaging rather than email.³

America is also increasingly a country of mobile phone users. While current market penetration had moved to roughly 54% in 2003, the US lagged behind countries such as Norway (with roughly 91% penetration) or Taiwan (with 111% penetration).⁴ Equally importantly, when Americans pick up their mobile phones, overwhelming they do so to place or receive voice calls, not to send or receive an SMS. In countries such as Norway and Japan, at least among younger users, mobiles are more frequently used as texting devices than as speech technologies.⁵

ICT usage patterns in the US are not homogeneous across the population. As the Pew Internet and American Life studies have shown, to understand American computer-based communication patterns, you need to look separately at, for example, teenagers, college students, family groups, and older citizens. The research and discussion that follow focus on American college students.

For transmitting personal written messages via computer, Americans have two main options: email or instant messaging.⁶ A number of different instant messaging systems are available, including ICQ, MSN Messenger, and Yahoo! Messenger. However, most college instant messaging in the US is done through America Online's freely available program known as AIM (AOL Instant Messenger). The current AIM system encompasses a suite of functions that enable users not only to send synchronous messages to individuals but also to "present" themselves to members of their buddy list or anyone knowing their screen name.⁷ These forms of presentation include screen names, profiles, buddy icons, expressions, emoticons, fonts and colors, and away messages (Squires and Stacey 2002).

The first three of these functions – screen names, profiles, and buddy icons – tend to be reasonably stable over time. Sometimes selection of screen names is seen as a creative act (e.g., the choice of "Swissmiss" – also the name of a hot chocolate mix – by an American who had lived in Switzerland). Profiles and buddy icons enable users to create a persona (real or imagined) that they wish to reveal (or

¹ www.ipsos-reid.com.

² www.pewinternet.org/reports/chart.asp?img=Daily_A6.htm.

³ Pew Internet & American Life Project, June 20, 2001, "Teenage Life Online: The Rise of the Instant-Message Generation and the Internet's Impact on Friendships and Family Relationships" (www.pewinternet.org/reports/toc.asp?Report=36).

⁴ International Telecommunication Union (www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/at_glance/cellular03.pdf).

⁵ Raban 2002; Ling *et al.* 2002; Hashimoto 2002.

⁶ Such multi-user forms of computer mediated communication as chat or listservs are excluded from the present discussion.

⁷ Individual users can create their own AIM social circle by constructing a buddy list, which compiles the screen names of people with whom they regularly wish to communicate (or whose whereabouts they wish to track). By looking at their buddy list, IM users can see which "buddies" are presently logged on to AIM. Users can also check one another's profiles and away messages.

project) to others. A profile might contain information such as date of birth, hobbies, favorite movies, contact information, links to Web sites, or quotations. Buddy icons (which are projected in the lower left hand corner of an instant messaging box during an IM conversational exchange) can be created independently or selected from a set of graphics that AOL provides. AIM Expressions are essentially themed electronic stationery. The “theme” you select (e.g., basketball, a pop star) shows up as a sidebar (or a light overall image) on many of the IM functions you are using. AIM offers a variety of pre-formed emoticons that can be inserted into an IM, a profile screen, or an away message. Similarly, users can customize fonts and colors when constructing text for IMs, profiles, or away messages.

3 AIM Away Messages

3.1 How Away Messages Work

Away messages were originally designed to enable AIM users who were still logged on to their computers but not physically sitting at their machines to alert possible interlocutors not to expect immediate replies to instant messages. For example, the user might have gone off to the bathroom, to get something to eat, or to attend class. During a user’s absence, an away message creates a social link with other members of the user’s messaging circle. As one female undergraduate put it, “Even if they are not chatting [on IM], you can still know all about someone’s life by reading their away messages”.

We can think of away messages as a form of “onstage” behavior in contrast to instant messaging conversations, which may be seen as “backstage” activity (Goffman 1959). Gloria Jacobs argues that among American teenage girls, “the backstage conversations [i.e., instant messaging] are where alliances are formed, problems are discussed and solved, and plans are made beyond the hearing of others ... [while] the onstage places [i.e., away messages] are where alliances are declared and social positions and presence are established” (Jacobs 2003:13).

AIM users know that a member of their online social circle has posted an away message by looking at the buddy list that appears on their screen. This list indicates not only which members of the list are currently online but also which ones (i.e., of those logged on) have posted away messages. A (virtual) yellow piece of paper next to a buddy’s screen name indicates that person has posted an away message. By clicking on the piece of paper, you can view the message. AIM provides a default away message (“I’m away from my computer right now”), and hundreds of public access web sites (e.g. www.awaymessages.com) list thousands of sample messages.

3.2 Presence and Mobility in Away Messages and SMS⁸

We have suggested that away messages enable users to create a sense of social presence even when they are, ostensibly, absent. That is, users posting away messages can be physically mobile (i.e., absent from a networked computer) while remaining in persistent contact with their social circle through use of away messages.

Like SMS on mobile phones, away messages provide a textual medium both for constructing indicators of presence as well as for managing incoming messages from constituents in your social circle. Unlike

⁸ This comparison benefited from discussion with Rich Ling.

instant messaging and voice functions on mobile phones,⁹ both away messages and SMS are asynchronous forms of communication. Users of away messages and SMS can screen incoming messages, determining when – or whether – to respond. Both sets of users also have the option of constructing texts of their own choosing, which may or may not reflect reality. For example, a user can post an away message declaring absence from the computer (when he or she is actually sitting in front of it) or send an SMS announcing an afternoon of shopping (when the sender is actually in the library doing homework).

Yet the analogy between away messages and SMS is imprecise. While there is a cost for doing texting on mobile phones, away messages are “free”, perhaps leading to divergent language or usage patterns in the two media. Moreover, although asynchronous, SMS tends to be more interactive, frequently generating conversational exchanges more akin to instant messaging than to away messages. And third, mobile phones enable users to view and send SMS during more times of the day and in more physical locations than do computers (via which away messages are posted and read). This issue of accessibility raises the question of whether users of away messages and instant messaging more generally perceive themselves to be “tethered” in comparison with those doing texting on “mobile” phones.

4 Case Study of Away Message Usage on an American College Campus

To better understand how away messages function in the United States, we gathered and analyzed a corpus of away messages posted by American University undergraduates or by age-mates on their AIM buddy list. American University is a selective undergraduate and graduate institution located in a residential setting in the upper-northwest corner of Washington, DC. The school has approximately 5350 full-time undergraduates, about 55% of whom live in university housing. Campus dormitories are all wired via a high-speed network. Additionally, there are open computing labs on campus, and numerous locations on campus, including dormitories, offer wireless network connections.

4.1 Design of Study

The corpus was gathered in Fall 2002 by 19 undergraduate students enrolled in an Honors Colloquium entitled “Language in the New Millennium”.¹⁰ Each student collected data from two subjects, one male and one female, who were on the student’s AIM buddy list, generating a total of 38 subjects. Five away messages were collected from each subject, yielding a corpus of 190 away messages. A randomization process was used for selecting the screen names on the buddy list from which away messages were collected. Data collection took place over a two-week period.

In addition to collecting the away messages themselves, researchers calculated the average number of words per message for each of their subjects, did a brief content and stylistic analysis of the messages, and offered their own snapshot view of the subjects’ off-line personalities. Several researchers also interviewed their subjects, eliciting the writers’ rationales for the content and style of their away messages. The present study only formally reports on issues relating to message length, gender, and content, though it also taps into the interviews done with some of the 38 subjects.

⁹ We set aside here issues of caller ID and voice mail on mobile phones.

¹⁰ The senior author is grateful to the entire class for its role in gathering and analyzing data, and to Michael Mass, Director of the University Honors Program at American University, for initially bringing the phenomenon of away messages to the senior author’s attention.

4.2 Data and Analysis

The corpus of 190 away messages yielded an array of styles and moods, a good deal of humor, and a substantial display of personal information. While subjects sometimes recycled their own away messages (since they can be saved), no one resorted to AIM's default away message or to public away message sites. Our analysis also includes several examples that did not appear in the formal corpus but that student researchers had used or otherwise encountered in their prior experience with away messages. Such examples are indicated with the notation "{not in corpus}".

4.2.1 Message Length and Gender

We began by calculating the mean length of the away messages. Message length varied enormously across individual subjects. Summing across each subject's five-message sample, individual means ranged from 1 word to 49.2 words per message. Summing across female subjects, the average length of away message was 12.3 words. The average length for male subjects was 13.3.

Compared with IM conversations, where messages sent by college students average 5 or 6 words per turn (Baron In Press), away messages are fairly lengthy. Clearly, technology presents no barrier to producing substantial messages in either venue, given the ease with which text can be generated on a full computer keyboard. Moreover, students in the survey were accomplished computer users, with years of experience in writing papers, collecting research materials, and composing email and/or instant messages). Nonetheless, an obvious question (which we address below) is why so many subjects in the study sent lengthy away messages.

4.2.2 Content Analysis

A preliminary content analysis suggested separating the away messages into two major categories: Informational/Discursive and Entertainment. Each of these categories was then divisible into subcategories:

Informational/Discursive:

- "I'm away"
- initiate discussion or social encounter
- convey personal information (about self, opinions, sense of humor)
- convey personal information to selected other(s)

Entertainment:

- humorous comments (e.g., jokes, plays on words)
- quotations (from authors, songs, movies, TV shows, friends)
- links to Web sites

Because the sample size was small (190 messages), we did not undertake a statistical analysis of the data by type. Rather, we focused on understanding the spectrum of message types and, equally importantly, the communicative or social role messages appeared to be serving.

Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4 summarize the subcategories of Informational/Discursive messages, distinguishing in each case between the overt function of the message type and the social or communicative functions

the messages appear to be filling. Figure 5 summarizes the analysis of Entertainment away messages (combining together the three subcategories). A number of away messages overlap categories (especially where humor or a quotation is involved). We have included such messages under the particular category we wish to illustrate, though mindful of their multi-functionality.

Overt Function: “I’m Away”

The first subcategory of informational/discursive messages contains away messages that overtly declare their authors are away from their computers and therefore not available to respond to instant messages, despite still being logged on to AIM. Figure 1 summarizes the social and communicative functions of these messages.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

The purely communicative function of “I’m away” messages is to alert members of your buddy list that even though you are logged on to AIM, you cannot (or will not) be responding immediately to instant messages they might send. Subjects in the study used three forms of away messages to fill this function. The simplest (“I really am away”) states that the user is unavailable (e.g., “out”) or engaged in a specific activity or at a specific location (e.g., “the library”), thus accounting for the absence. A variant on this message type (“Itinerary”) spells out the sequence of activities in which the sender will be engaged. While the level of detail appearing in some of these messages may seem unnecessary, student researchers noted the social usefulness of informing friends how you are spending your day. Such detail enables members of an online social circle to continue a conversation stream (e.g., “So how was your test?”) rather than needing to begin the encounter from scratch (e.g., “What did you do today?”) when they resume IMing or encounter one another face-to-face.

Some AIM users care less about laying out their agendas than conveying the essential information that they will be unavailable. For this purpose, users can grab whatever message from their saved arsenal they happen upon first (“Randomly selected message”). As one student researcher explained, it is irrelevant if you are actually cleaning your room or off at a class, since in either event, you are unavailable. However, the reader of such an away message generally has no way of knowing whether the literal content of the message is true.

Three variants of overt “I’m away” messages appear to be serving predominantly social functions. “Remaining in the loop” messages constitute requests for a message to be waiting when the individual posting the away message returns to active use of AIM. A more pronounced form of “remaining in the loop” is to request immediate communication through another ICT (see Figure 2 below). This “remaining in the loop” function is similar to telephone voice mail (e.g., “I can’t take your call now. Please leave a message.”). Both media invite all comers to leave messages. However, in the case of voice mail, the caller has a particular interlocutor in mind. With away messages, the equivalent of the caller (i.e., the person checking his or her buddy list to see which members of the list are online and who has posted an away message) may or may not be seeking to communicate with a specific individual. “Callers” can access the away messages of anyone online, thus using the system as a social checkpoint for assessing the status of a collection of people.

A second socially motivated function of “I’m away” messages (“Lurking/filtering”) is monitoring the incoming traffic of IMs, allowing senders to decide which messages to respond to and which to ignore. An away message such as “Sleeping...or am I ☺” signals buddies there is some chance their IMs will be read (and responded to) immediately, but the recipient of such an IM is not obligated to do so.

Apparently many college students post “I really am away” messages (e.g., “out”) when they are actually sitting at their computers. This ruse allows them to ignore whatever IMs might come in but also to commence IMing if someone on the buddy list should post an interesting away message or send an interesting IM.

The final group of socially driven “I’m away” messages (“Intentional misrepresentation”) enables senders to construct a self-image through use of creative license. Although we could not confirm examples of such usage in the data base, class researchers reported instances in which friends posted away messages detailing socially impressive activities (e.g., an elaborate date with a desirable partner) when in fact the sender was sitting at home watching TV. Since computer mediated communication more generally allows for invention of new identities (e.g., regarding age, gender, personality, nationality), it is hardly surprising to find fabrication of activities in away messages.

Given the ostensible function of away messages (namely, to say that the writer cannot be reached on IM), why don’t people who will not be responding to IMs simply sign off from AIM? Part of the problem seems to be technological. The default setting of AIM triggers a sound whenever you log on or off, alerting everyone who has you on his or her buddy list. While the default sound can be turned off, a visual icon still appears, showing a door opening or closing. The researchers suggested that such an intrusion was socially “too loud”. Not only are you noisily announcing your presence (when you log on) but you are inviting a deluge of IMs. Commenting on the “lurking/filtering” function (or use of an “I really am away” message when you are not), students again noted the importance of social politeness. If you are on AIM but only want to reply selectively to messages, posting an away message and then only responding selectively to IMs you receive is a way of not hurting the feelings of people whose IMs you ignore.¹¹

Overt Function: Initiate Discussion or Social Encounter

The second informational/discursive subcategory of away messages invites communication in the immediate or near future by another ICT (generally the mobile phone or an IM message) or face-to-face. Figure 2 summarizes the social and communicative functions of this group of messages.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

The first cluster of these away messages (“Reach me through a different ICT”) entreats readers to initiate communication immediately. Sometimes the primary benefactor is the person posting the away message (e.g., “I wanna feel the love!”) while at other times, posters report a sense of obligation to their buddies. In the words of one subject in the study, “I feel like I should be accessible. My cell phone is always attached. I don’t want my friends to think there’s a time when they can’t reach me.”

A second cluster of messages (“Let’s chat online”) invites buddies to IM the person posting the away message when he or she is working at the computer (e.g., “Please distract me”). This “boredom” function of away messages looks like an oxymoron, but it turns out to be an efficient means of

¹¹ SMS on mobile phones also allows users to manage their “presence” (i.e., their availability to respond to an incoming message). However, as a technologically asynchronous ICT, SMS affords its users more “presence” anonymity than does IM.

broadcasting a message to a large number of possible readers in the hope that someone will respond. As in the case of lurking/filtering messages (Figure 1), individuals posting away messages that solicit online chatting can select the incoming IMs to which they wish to respond. The third set of away messages in this cluster (“Invite face-to-face contact”) constitutes a similar sort of broadcast request “e.g., WANTED: One date”) for someone’s physical rather than virtual presence.

Overt Function: Messages Conveying Personal Information (About Self, Opinions, Humor)

Users sometimes create away messages to convey personal information – about themselves, their opinions, or their facility with humor.¹² Figure 3 summarizes the social and communicative functions of this category of messages.

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

Many users of AIM see the away message function as a useful venue for presenting how they define themselves (either in general or at the moment) and how they wish others to perceive them. A number of the messages in this category serve multiple functions. For example, “Reading for once” indicates the writer’s attitude towards having a lot to read as well as implying unavailability (“I really am away”) without specifying location. “This chik needs filla” conveys unavailability (the author has left her computer to go and eat), but does so in a humorous way, thereby revealing something of the writer’s personality.

Overt Function: Convey Personal Information to Selected Other(s)

The last informational/discursive subcategory is broadcasting to one’s entire online social circle personal information that is intended for a specific person (or persons). Figure 4 summarizes the social and communicative functions of this group of messages.

INSERT FIGURE 4 HERE

Why do some AIM users choose the public forum of away messages to convey information seemingly targeted to selective members of their buddy list? One explanation is rooted in AIM technology. As of Fall 2002, AIM did not enable people to send IMs to users who were not signed on to the system. The only way to communicate via IM with someone logged off was through an away message, which could be accessed when the intended reader returned online. Responding to a question about privacy in away messages, one interviewee bluntly explained that he writes what he feels like writing and does not care who sees it. In other instances, students explained that they generally communicated through IM with a tight circle of friends, all of whom would likely know the individuals named in an away message. Therefore, away messages referring to specific people constituted intentional sharing of personal information with friends.

However, the rationale behind some postings of “private” messages may also be public display. By addressing or referring to a significant other or particular friend in an away message, authors publicize

¹² CMC researchers have often commented on the importance of humor in the medium (e.g., Baym 1995; Danet 2001).

their personal relationships, reminding members of their buddy list (or potentially anyone else with access to their screen name) that they are the sort of people who have such friends. This public display function is similar to the use of “I’m away” messages containing intentional misrepresentation in order to impress others (e.g., claiming to be on a date when actually at home).

Overt Function: Entertainment (Humor, Quotes, Links)

The final group of away messages in the corpus encompasses postings primarily designed to entertain. Figure 5 presents examples, clustered by type.

INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

Why do AIM users post away messages designed essentially to entertain? The answer is grounded partly in the technology and partly in the social goals and expectations of users in this age cohort.

Experienced users of email are familiar with “signature files”, which allow senders to automatically post at the end of their emails not only professional contact information but also pithy sayings or quotations. While instant messages themselves have no signature files, “Entertainment” away messages may serve comparable functions, as may IM profiles (see Section 2 above).

Both student researchers and subjects reported viewing their selections of entertainment clips as a form of self-expression. However, a number of users also commented that they perceived entertainment to be an essential component of the away messages genre. One subject noted, “I like to make people happy with my messages”. Another indicated that since she enjoyed other people’s away messages that made her laugh, she tried to make her own messages funny. A third said he likes to entertain people. Several others felt they had to justify themselves when their away messages weren’t funny or creative, typically explaining that they lacked time or energy to craft amusing messages.

4.3 How Senders View Away Messages

Away messages clearly have multiple functions, not all of which are revealed by the overt form of the messages themselves. Interviews with some of the 38 subjects offered insights regarding their senders’ intentions. We have already noted how important students felt humor was in creating away messages. Other factors include personal motivations for posting away messages and the ways in which users can creatively manipulate the use for which the medium was originally designed.

4.3.1 Personal Motivations

There is lack of consensus among American college students as to how much away messages should reveal or justify their whereabouts. Some users deemed it important to let potential interlocutors know why the person posting an away message was absent and how to locate him or her. Others felt strongly that specifying their precise location was an invasion of privacy.

Similarly, away message users held differing opinions regarding the appropriate length of an away message. While some advocated – and sent – one word messages, others scoffed at the “laziness” of such writers. In the words of one subject, “I don’t appreciate/agree with people whose away messages consist of one word (such as ‘away’, ‘sleeping’, or ‘work’). I know these people are more interesting than that, and away messages can be indicative of your mood, your state of mind, and what you’re doing at the time. The best ones can do all 3.”

4.3.2 Creative Manipulation of Away Messages

A number of users consciously manipulated the away message genre to serve individual needs. For example, one interviewee noted that she only posts away messages when she is in her room, working at her computer. (Her messages included the likes of “Eating the souls of my fellow man” and “*sigh*”.) For her, away messages were a way of expressing personal information (sometimes humorously) about her current state (see Figure 3), perhaps to generate conversation with people viewing her messages.

The flip side of using away messages to express your feelings is to craft messages that intentionally camouflage your state of mind. One subject commented that she posts quotations when she does not feel like talking or giving away too much information. The same individual reported using self-deprecation (“I could easily be replaced with a dancing chimp” – Figure 3) when “it has been a long day” and she doesn’t want to go into the details of why. Another subject revealed that she uses humor to mask her stress level in order not to bother friends with her troubles, but at the same time hinting that not all is well.

4.3.3 Prescriptions for Constructing Away Messages

Several of the people interviewed offered overall assessments of how away messages should be constructed. One asserted, “I figure away messages should either make you think, laugh, or tell you where I am...and sometimes they’re just random.” Another said, “I believe away messages should be funny, informative, and reflect who you are.” A comprehensive summary of how to construct an away message was posted in the AIM profile of someone on the buddy list of a member of the research group:¹³

it is important not to underestimate the value of a good away message. too much internet time is wasted by people reading mediocre/poor away messages. a few rules to go by:

- 1) no one word away messages - EVER
- 2) quotes/lyrics, unless appropriately timely, are a poor excuse for away messages and make the writer look like a hack
- 3) humor is the only way to go- i'm not looking for a deeper understanding of life, or a little tug on the heart strings from my instant messenger
- 4) keep inside jokes inside
- 5) announcements are alright, however they should be followed by something humorous
- 6) if you're using colors, do so tastefully
- 7) don't leave your cell phone number. people aren't looking at your away message to contact you, they're looking at it cause they're bored out of their mind writing some paper
- 8) no freakin emoticons

5 Tethered or Mobile: American Perceptions

Contemporary American college students effectively use the away message function of AOL’s Instant Messenger to help manage their non-face-to-face social relationships. Outside of the United States,

¹³ The summary (slightly edited) was constructed by Brian Ayers and Rob Berrey.

many teens and young adults use the SMS function on mobile phones as the main written means by which these social ties are maintained.¹⁴ From the perspective of a mobile phone/SMS culture, Americans may seem tethered to their computers (either networked at stationary locations or lugged along to function wirelessly) in order to engage in such communicative activity. But do Americans perceive themselves to be tethered?

5.1 ICT Usage Patterns and Perceptions of American College Students

We have been arguing that among American college students, the away message function of IM is perceived as a means of staying in the social loop, even when not physically tethered to one's computer. In looking at the issue of mobility, we need to keep in mind that many contemporary American college students are accustomed to carrying laptops around with them (to use in class, in the library, or in public spaces). Moreover, public access computers are commonly available (e.g., in libraries or computer labs),¹⁵ and the number of public network drops – along with areas having wireless access – continues to increase on college campuses, in coffee shops, and in airports. Thus, use of such Internet functions as AIM is no longer restricted to a student's place of residence. As a result, contemporary American college students have multiple venues for engaging in IM conversations (and for checking and posting away messages), potentially contributing to a feeling of mobility.

In a focus group with American University undergraduates,¹⁶ we probed whether students felt “tethered” or “mobile” in using networked computers and mobile phones. For both forms of ICT, students reported that the terms “tethered” and “mobile” could be interpreted in multiple ways. One meaning of “tethered” with respect to computers was the need to stay near a computer, e.g., bringing your laptop to class or seeking out computers in public spaces to check instant messages (and related functions such as away messages). Focus group participants did not report feeling tethered in this way. They generally did not carry laptops around (noting they did not have wireless connections), and they rarely sought out public computers. Several commented on their sense of “time out” relief when not at their computers. When away from their computers during school vacations, students in the groups did not report feeling the need to get online to do emailing, initiate IM conversations, or check away messages.

Some students noted they felt “tethered” when they returned to their computers after a period of time away, facing hundreds of email messages that needed responses. One student complained about being “tethered” to a family member by AIM. The student had recently taught his mother how to use IM, and now she wished to keep in frequent IM communication with her son. The son began “blocking” her messages (an option of AIM) when he wanted to remain logged on to IM (for communicating with friends) and especially when he wished to post off-color away messages he did not wish his mother to see.

¹⁴ See e.g., Raban *et al.* 2002; Katz and Aakhus 2002. Hashimoto 2001 indicates that in Japan, students favor SMS over email for this function, even when email is available.

¹⁵ An abbreviated version of AIM (“AIM Express”) can easily be downloaded to public-access machines.

¹⁶ The group consisted of 5 males and 3 females, including 6 sophomores, 1 freshman, and 1 junior. Of the eight, all were frequent users of instant messaging. All had mobile phones, but only one had actively used SMS, and that was in connection with her job.

With regard to mobile phones, students commented on feeling two senses of mobility. First, they noted they could always be reached (either directly or via voice mail). Second, students reported feeling mobile in that they were free to ignore calls. By looking at caller ID, they could decide whether to take the call or let it go to voice mail. We wondered whether students in the group ever felt tethered to their mobile phones (the way some American adults do) because they were always “on call”. The students’ answer was uniformly “no”.

Why do students feel they can walk away from their computers for periods of time without feeling a need to check email, engage in IM conversations, or view away messages? For many American college students, the voice functions of mobile phones complement the written functions of computer mediated communication. When not at a computer, students simply switch modes (from writing to voice). As we saw in Figure 2, some students even post away messages requesting that buddies call the poster’s mobile phone.

5.2 The Future of ICTs in America

Will current computer-based habits of American college-aged students persist as mobile phones (and the availability of texting functions) continue to penetrate the American market? The answer will be driven in part by the proliferation and technological development of portable ICT devices (especially PDAs and mobile phones that handle not just SMSs or brief IMs but also longer text files such as attachments, AIM profiles, and away messages). However some of the answer may reflect cultural rather than technological factors.

ICT cultures on the two sides of the Atlantic are both converging and (at least as of yet) maintaining independence. On the one hand, personal computers and use of the Internet (technologies already entrenched in American culture) are making considerable headway in Europe.¹⁷ On the other hand, growth of SMS in the United States does not nearly approach usage in Europe.¹⁸ That is, the US is not presently an SMS “culture”. From the perspective of SMS cultures, the United States may appear at best slow and at worst misguided with regard to adoption of mobile written communication devices in place of more tethered computer-based messaging through email or IM. But like most issues of cultural adoption, the ICT story is the product of many variables.

A plethora of factors can influence individual and social decisions to adopt a new communication medium. Among the technological issues are: How convenient are the new ICT devices (e.g., how much do they weigh; can they be worn)? How efficient are the devices (e.g., number of characters on a screen, availability of predictive input software)? If, for example, users are accustomed to full keyboards (the case in the United States), will they willingly shift to tiny mobile phone keypads?

¹⁷ Raban *et al.* 2002.

¹⁸ For example, in the third quarter of 2003, 1.7 billion text messages were sent in the US (<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/06/26/technology/26ALIB.html?ex=1089280032&ei=1&en=09043265157765e3>) while that same number were sent in the UK in the month of November 2003 alone (<http://www.mda-mobiledata.org/resource/hottopics/sms.asp>). Note that in 2004, the UK population was only 59 million compared with a US population of 293 million.

A second factor is market issues: How much does a device (or use of the device) cost? Can devices made by different companies communicate with one another?¹⁹ Which devices are successfully marketed? Are technologies available for free (such as AIM, which clearly encourages use of instant messaging in the US)? Thirdly, there are issues of cultural entrenchment: How much re-education would be needed to switch from one ICT base to another? What is the user – and usage – base for a particular ICT? Fourthly, changing fashion can influence adoption – or rejection – of new ICTs: Will mobile phone users get tired of inputting SMSs? Will senders of SMSs, email, and IMs get bored with emoticons?

Finally, there is the issue of physical praxis, which may play a critical role in determining the future of texting in America. The US is a car-based culture. We drive to work, drive to the grocery store, even drive around the corner. We use mobile phones in the car, but for talking rather than texting. In much of the rest of the world, people use far more public transportation as well as walk more. You can send an SMS while on a bus or tram, while waiting for a train, or while walking down the street. If Americans are tethered, it is largely to their cars, and cars make text messaging difficult or impossible.²⁰

5.3 The Future of IM and Away Messages in America

Since away messages are part of the larger system of instant messaging, part of the fate of away messages is tied to the future of instant messaging more generally. Among the factors that may influence future use of away messages in the US to maintain social ties are these: Will AOL continue to make AIM available for free? Will IM become a dominant communication medium for a broad spectrum of age cohorts, as American businesses increasingly replace email with instant messaging? As college graduates make the transition into the world of work, will they lose interest in the features of AIM designed to foster self-expression (including away messages)?

In this paper, we have attempted to demonstrate how away messages in instant messaging are used by American college-aged students to help manage their social spheres and have considered the extent to which these students feel “tethered” or “mobile” as a result of their ICT usage. We have also suggested that choice of alternative ICT systems reflects cultural patterns, not simply technological affordances. Both computer-based communication (including IM conversations and away messages) as well as mobile phones (both as texting and voice devices) enable users to manage their social spheres. The particular forms of ICT that college-aged students choose to manage interpersonal relationships are likely to continue evolving in perhaps unpredictable ways for the foreseeable future.

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¹⁹ As Raban *et al.* 2002 explain, SMS usage in Israel was quite low because, until recently, the four mobile phone providers in the country employed different technologies that did not permit customers on one network to send SMSs to those on another.

²⁰ On college campuses where few students drive, we might predict higher use of SMS.

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