

Keeping Social Ties Away from Home

Being Virtually Together across Continents
through Instant Messaging

With the advent of the internet, living abroad no longer means being disconnected from one's native culture; people can read up-to-date news about their hometown on the web, watch broadcast programs in their home country through real-time video streaming services, search for various contents on the internet in their native language, and communicate with others who share the same cultural background through online forums and chat rooms. By keeping virtual contact with their native culture, people may retain and reinforce their native socio-cultural norms even when they are not physically a part of their home place.

This paper reports the findings of a study whose purpose was to find out whether people actively maintain connections to those from the same native culture through the use of instant messenger (IM). IM provides a convenient and inexpensive way for people to have real-time long-distance communication with their friends, family, and colleagues on the internet. Hence, this study was designed to explore IM's potential for helping people to keep their social ties to their hometown community and maintain their cultural identities while they are away from home. A survey of Korean students who grew up in Korea and came to study in the United States was conducted in 2006 to learn about their usage frequency of IM and other communication tools, and the influence of geographical proximity on the composition of their IM social networks. The data reveals that one's social network is no longer confined to the boundaries of physical distances, and IM helps people to maintain frequent social interactions with distant contacts at a global scale.

Instant Messaging and Virtual Social Ties to Home

The internet helps to bring people with shared interests or causes together globally and locally. According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project's survey in 2001, 84% of internet users have chosen the internet to contact or get information from a group, and 49% of those who used the in-

ternet for such purposes said that the internet helped them to connect with others with similar interests.¹ The study also reported that 26% of internet users have used it to strengthen their ties to their local communities by e-mail or other means. This suggests that communicating online and offline are not mutually exclusive: people use both modes of communication interchangeably when interacting with others. In other words, people's social networks are no longer confined to their neighborhood and kinship ties in close physical proximity,² but can reach out across the globe by means of the internet.

Still, Scholte argued that as the world becomes more globalized and people are more exposed to foreign cultures, they strive harder to preserve their own national identities.³ What Matei and Ball-Rokeach found from focus group interviews of ethnic neighborhood residents in Los Angeles supports Scholte's argument in an online environment – people made most of new online social ties with those of the same ethnicity.⁴ In addition, they found:

During the discussion, a Korean woman said that she found it difficult to make friends when she first came to the United States. E-mail was for her a natural way to contact Korean friends who live far away. In her own words, through e-mail “it seems like they live close to me”.⁵

This is an interesting quote because scholars contend that e-mail is a lower-bandwidth, less-rich communication medium than face-to-face communication because nonverbal cues are lost in text conversations.⁶ Yet, e-mail seems to have sufficed for the Korean woman in the above quote to

¹ John Horrigan, *Online Communities: Networks That Nurture Long-Distance Relationships and Local Ties*, Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2001, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/47/report_display.asp.

² Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia, “Virtual Communities as Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone”, in Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (eds.), *Communities in Cyberspace*, New York: Routledge, 1999, p. 169.

³ Jan Aart Scholte, *Globalization: A Critical Introduction*, New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005, pp. 227–230.

⁴ Sorin Matei and Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, “Real and Virtual Social Ties: Connections in the Everyday Lives of Seven Ethnic Neighborhoods”, *American Behavioral Scientist*, vol. 45, no. 3 (2001).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 559.

⁶ Joseph B. Walther and Malcolm R. Parks, “Cues Filtered Out, Cues Filtered In: Computer-Mediated Communication and Relationships”, in Mark L. Knapp and John A. Daly (eds.), *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication*, 3rd ed., Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002.

fill the gap in her face-to-face social bonding in the new country. Matei and Ball-Rokeach's observation is worth further exploration, especially as richer communication technologies such as IM with integrated voice and video chatting capabilities become available.

IM differs from e-mail in that conversations flow almost synchronously and most IM applications are equipped with enhanced multimedia communication features. In addition, IM chats are similar to telephone calls in that both are mostly used for real-time conversation comprised of relatively short messages; yet, they differ in that IM chats cost virtually nothing as long as one has internet connection and access to a computer, whereas telephone calls incur additional charges for lengthy calls and long-distance services. Moreover, the presence-awareness feature of IM allows one to initiate instant conversations at both parties' convenience. Hence, IM has good potential for those who communicate frequently with long-distance contacts.

IM has become a popular communication medium in the last several years; the Pew Internet & American Life Project found in 2004 that 42% of American internet users used IM, and the overall IM population grew by 29% since 2000.⁷ Although the results indicated that e-mail was still the dominant form of online communication, 24% of the IM users said that they used IM more frequently than e-mail. The IM usage rate is even higher in the younger generation: In 2001, 74% of online teenagers were IM users.⁸ Considering that ICQ, the first mainstream IM software, was introduced only about a decade ago in November 1996, communicating over IM is quickly becoming a part of people's everyday lives.

The proliferation of IM as an everyday communication technology brings the following question: When physical distance and communication cost is no longer a barrier, what would happen to the communication networks of the IM users who grew up in one cultural context and then moved to live in a new cultural context? According to social influence theories, people's attitudes and behaviours are affected by those of others in the same communication network:⁹ In other words, the composition

⁷ Eulynn Shiu and Amanda Lenhart, *How Americans Use Instant Messaging*, Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2004, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/133/report_display.asp.

⁸ Amanda Lenhart, Lee Rainie and Oliver Lewis, *Teenage Life Online: The Rise of the Instant-Message Generation and the Internet's Impact on Friendships and Family Relationships*, Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2001, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/36/report_display.asp.

⁹ Peter R. Monge and Noshir S. Contractor, "Emergence of Communication Networks", in Fredric M. Jablin and Linda L. Putnam (eds.), *The New Handbook of Organiza-*

of one's network would inform the person's cultural orientation. Traditionally, people create more social ties with those in close physical proximity, so the amount of time one has been physically away from home would influence the composition of one's social network; however, geographical distance becomes meaningless when communicating online.¹⁰

Therefore, this study was designed to see whether those who are away from home actually use IM to keep their social ties to those living in their hometown, and whether the geographical distribution of their IM contacts change depending on how long they have lived in the new place. The following research question and hypothesis were generated to explore these questions.

RQ: Compared to other communication media such as telephone, postal mail, e-mail, and personal websites/blogs, do people use IM frequently to communicate with those in their home country?

HP: The longer an IM user has lived in the new place, the more contacts in the new geographical location would have been accumulated, resulting in less percentage of IM contacts located in the IM user's home country.

Methods

Participants

Participants (N = 26) in this study were Korean students who were enrolled in US universities and used IM to communicate with their friends, family, and colleagues both in and out of the U.S. Surveys were conducted primarily online: invitations to an online survey were posted on e-mail listservs and community websites that serve Korean student bodies. The online survey asked the participants about their IM and other communications tool use, the geographic locations of their active IM contacts, and demographic information. Participation was entirely voluntary, and the participants were able to withdraw from the survey at any time without any kind of consequences to themselves.

tional Communication: Advances in Theory, Research, and Methods, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000. See also Ronald E. Rice, "Using Network Concepts to Clarify Sources and Mechanisms of Social Influence", in William D. Richards, Jr. and George A. Barnett (eds.), *Progress in Communication Sciences: Advances in Communication Network Analysis*, vol. 12, Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1993.

¹⁰ Peter R. Monge and Noshir S. Contractor, *Theories of Communication Networks*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, pp. 227–233.

Measurement

Whether the participant is a current active IM user or not was measured by asking whether the participant chatted with anyone during the past week from the survey date. Comparing the frequency of IM use to that of other communication tools was measured by asking the participants to rate the frequency of each of the five communication tools (Telephone, Letter (postal mail), E-mail, Instant Messenger, and Personal Website/Blog) on a scale of 1 (rarely) to 5 (often).

As for the geographic locations of one's IM contacts, the participants were asked to report only the contacts with whom they chatted at least once during the past week so that the data is of active members in their IM social network, not of dormant contacts. Answers to this question were gathered in an open-ended format, and then coded into four categories (U.S. local [within about two hours driving distance], U.S. long-distance, Korea, and other international locations) to measure the percentage of contacts that were located in Korea and in close geographical proximity in the U.S. out of the total number of contacts they chatted with in the previous week.

Results

Participants

Of the 26 participants, 20 were at the doctoral level, 4 were at the master's level, and 2 were undergraduates. The average age was 32 (range from 20 to 42), and the gender distribution was equal (13:13). The participants used the internet for 11 years and IM for 6 years on average. Among the 26 IM users, 22 of them reported that they chatted with at least one person during the past week from the survey date (9 females and 13 males), leaving the other four as non-active IM users.

Frequency of Communication Tool Use

Compared to other communication media such as telephone, postal mail, e-mail, and personal websites/blogs, the overall results showed that the participants did not necessarily use IM the most frequently to communicate with their friends, family, colleagues, and others in their home country. Rather, e-mail and telephone were the more frequently used methods of communicating overseas in general (see Table 1).

	1 rarely	2	3 somewhat	4	5 often	Median of frequency
Telephone	7.7	11.5	23.1	19.2	38.5	4
Postal mail	83.3	8.3	0	8.3	0	1
E-mail	7.7	7.7	19.2	15.4	50.0	4.5
Instant Messenger	16.0	8.0	28.0	28.0	20.0	3
Personal Website/Blog	32.0	8.0	20.0	24.0	16.0	3

Table 1
Percentage of the reported frequency of communication tool use

Geographical Distribution of IM Contacts

For this part, only the data reported by the active IM users were considered (n = 22). Between the active IM user’s duration of stay in the U.S. and the percentage of the user’s active IM contacts located in Korea, and between the duration of stay in the U.S. and the percentage of one’s active IM contacts located in close physical proximity in the U.S. (within around two hours driving distance), both analyses showed that there is no clear relationship between how long one has lived in the U.S. and the geographical composition of their IM contacts. In addition, only 9 out of the 22 active IM users had more percentage of active IM contacts in their local U.S. community than in Korea, and there was no statistically significant difference in the duration of stay in the U.S. between those who had more contacts in close geographical proximity (n = 9; average duration of stay: 4.35 years) and those who had more contacts in Korea (n = 13; average duration of stay: 4.82 years). Therefore, the research hypothesis is not supported.

Discussion and Suggestion for Future Research

The first goal of this study was to examine how frequently people use IM, relative to other communications tools, to interact with their peers and relatives at home while they were away in a foreign country. Among telephone, postal letters, e-mail, IM, and personal websites/blogs, e-mail was found to be the most frequently used communication tool, followed by telephone. Yet, the distribution of responses to IM usage frequency suggests that IM is on its way to become a mainstream global communications medium, especially considering its relatively short history of consumer exposure.

The second objective of the study was to check the influence of geographical proximity on the formation of one's IM social network. Chatting with more IM contacts living in Korea than with those from the local U.S. community would indicate the person's level of exposure to the native culture and social norms, thus helping the IM user to maintain the native cultural identity. Still, according to the proximity principle in social networks, the longer one stayed in the U.S., the more contacts in the new place one might have accumulated in one's social network. The result, however, shows that the proximity mechanism did not work as expected in the composition of people's IM social networks. Rather, the Korean students in this study had a higher average percentage of IM contacts living in Korea, and their duration of stay in the U.S. did not influence whether they had more percentage of contacts in Korea or in their U.S. local town.

The overall findings suggest that the Korean students employed IM to maintain their social ties to Korea while they lived in the U.S. In this context, IM has a potential for helping people to retain and reinforce their native social norms and identity even when they are no longer physically a part of their hometown community. Nevertheless, to fully support the proposition, the special quality of ties and the structural properties of social networks that facilitate the maintenance of social norms and identity would have to be investigated in future research. For instance, the IM contacts located in the U.S. might have been all Koreans, which was not verified in this study. In addition, Lee, Sobal, and Frongillo noted that when asking one's boundary of social network, i.e. the number of close friends in in-group and out-group, it is also important to ask frequency or intensity of interactions with such contacts because not all out-group contacts may necessarily share the same amount of attention with in-group members.¹¹ Also, contacts from different social contexts, e.g. friends, family, or colleagues, could exhibit different tie characteristics and influence. Therefore, further studying these multiple dimensions of one's social network structure as well as the process of cultural identity maintenance will help us to better understand the relationship between IM social networking and retaining cultural identities while being physically away, but being virtually together.

¹¹ Soo-Kyung Lee, Jeffery Sobal and Edward A. Frongillo, "Comparison of Models of Acculturation: The Case of Korean Americans", *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology*, vol. 34, no. 3 (2003), p. 293.