



Why shy people use instant messaging: Loneliness and other motives

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ABSTRACT

Existing research suggests shy people may satisfy their affiliation needs through computerized forms of communication such as instant messaging (IM). Fifty-five undergraduates completed an IM use index, the Cheek and Buss (1981) shyness scale and a motives for IM use scale developed for this study. It was found that the strongest motives for IM use were to increase personal contact as opposed to gain social ease or to decrease loneliness. While a direct association between shyness and IM use intensity was not found, shyness was associated with using IM to decrease loneliness in comparison to other motives. It was concluded that shy people have multiple motives for using IM, but that decreasing loneliness is particularly important for them. Future research could examine how IM and other computerized communications compare to face-to-face interactions between shy and non-shy people.

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1. Introduction

Instant messaging (IM) is an increasingly popular form of communication. A study by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 53 million Americans use IM, and 36% of these users reported using IM on a daily basis (Shiu & Lenhart, 2004). Instant messaging (IM) is a text-based form of communication in which two or more people exchange text messages in real-time using the Internet. IM can be seen as one of the most recent manifestations of technologies, which reasonably could be used as a substitute for real-life human interaction such as virtual reality or social networking. One central research question regarding these technologies is the extent to which shy people are disproportionately attracted to them, because they allow for social interaction while offering protection from the stresses of face-to-face interactions (Ebeling-Witte, Frank, & Lester, 2007; Stritzke, Nguyen, & Durkin, 2004). The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationship between shyness and motives for the use of instant messaging.

Cheek and Buss (1981) define shyness as feelings of tension, concern, awkwardness and discomfort, and inhibition of normally expected social behavior while interacting with strangers or casual acquaintances. Shyness has been found to correlate with multiple negative emotions, such as feeling lonely, isolated, and unhappy (Wu & Yao, 2008). As would be expected, shyness has been found to inhibit socially fulfilling face-to-face interaction (Melchior & Cheek, 1990). Shyness has positive correlations with several behaviors, such as social awkwardness and inhibition, which could

compromise meaningful social interaction in a face-to-face setting (Cheek & Buss, 1981). Shyness can therefore inhibit the formation and maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Because research demonstrates an innate human need to form and maintain interpersonal relationships (Argyle, 1987; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Freedman, 1978; Myers, 1992), shyness can be linked to unhappiness, anxiety, and depression.

When not preoccupied with concerns regarding their performance however, shy people are just as socially capable as non-shy, socially able people (Gardner, Pickett, Jefferis, & Knowles, 2005). Computer-mediated communication has been postulated to provide protection from some of the negative effects of self-preoccupation through the elimination of physical social cues (Gardner et al., 2005). It would therefore make sense for shy individuals to use instant messaging to supplement their social lives, which may be unsatisfying. IM may reduce anxiety and allow shy persons to initiate more in-depth and more revealing conversations.

Existing research suggests that shy people often satisfy their affiliation needs through alternative forms of communication via technology. For example, socially anxious individuals have been found to prefer sending text messages via cell phones rather than speaking on the phone (Reid & Reid, 2007). Shyness has also been associated with using the Internet to decrease a perceived deficit in real-life social networks by establishing virtual friendships (ones in which the other has never been physically contacted), and relieving feelings of loneliness (Ebeling-Witte et al., 2007). It was therefore predicted that participants who report high levels of shyness will report using IM with greater frequency than less shy participants (Cacioppo et al., 2006), in order to satisfy the need for meaningful social interaction and affiliation.

Of particular interest was the question as to whether shy people use IM to decrease loneliness as opposed to other motives. Loneli-

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ness can be defined as a complex set of feelings that occurs when intimate and social needs are not adequately met (Cacioppo et al., 2006). Research has revealed a positive correlation between shyness and loneliness (e.g., Booth, Bartlett, & Bohnsack, 1992), with shy people reporting concern about their shyness, and desiring to become more sociable and talkative. It is hypothesized that shy people use IM to alleviate loneliness, while avoiding the discomfort they experience in social situations. Because shy people generally experience inhibited face-to-face interaction with others, it was also predicted that shyness would also be predictive of using IM for other motives.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Participants were 55 undergraduates attending a small, private liberal arts college. Participants had a mean age of 18.93 (SD = 1.11). They were 51.9% female and 48.1% male. The ethnic diversity of the sample was as follows: 7.4% were Hispanic, 1.9% were Asian, and 92.6% were Caucasian. Further demographics of the sample are outlined in more detail in Table 1.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. IM use index

Three items were taken from Hwang and Lombard (2006) measure of IM use behavior. Participants were asked to respond to the following questions, with greater scores indicating greater intensity of use: (1) how often did you use IM? (less than once a month, once a month, once a week, once a day, twice a day, 3–4 times a day, or more than four times a day); (2) how long did you use instant messaging per session? (<5 min, 5–15 min, 16–30 min, 31–45 min, 46 min–1 h, 1–2 h, 2–3 h, and >3 h); and (3) what is the total amount of time spend on instant messenger each day? (<5 min, 5–30 min, 30 min–1 h, 2–3 h, 3–4 h, 4–5 h, and >5 h). To create an index score representing intensity of IM use, the three items were combined in one index. The resulting index achieved adequate reliability ($\alpha = .67$).

2.2.2. IM motives

The IM motives scale was constructed using 13 specific statements extracted from a scale of 34 items from Recchiutti (2003) computer-mediated communication motives scale. Only socially relevant items were retained. One item was changed slightly in its wording. Participants were asked to answer on a 5-point Likert-type scale how much they agreed (from 1 = “strongly disagree”

to 5 = “strongly agree”) with statements regarding why they use IM.

For each of the 13 items, standard scores of skewness and kurtosis were computed, with a cutoff of -1 and $+1$, to eliminate highly skewed and/or kurtotic items. The application of this standard resulted in a pool of 11 items. Three subscales were identified based on a content analysis. Two science colleagues (one psychologist and one biologist) who were unaware of the hypotheses of the study assisted in the sorting of the items into potential subscales. Subsequent reliability analyses and subscale intercorrelations were conducted using the final categories chosen by the researchers. This validation strategy has been used successfully elsewhere (Hamby, 1996). Table 2 provides the three subscale intercorrelations. No subscale correlated with any other more than .60, providing evidence for the independence of these subscales from one another. The three subscales are as follows.

2.2.2.1. Personal contact motives (PCM). This scale includes statements that present positive or beneficial motives for why individuals might use instant messaging. Participants were asked the following statements: I use instant messaging... (1) to feel involved with what's going on with other people, (2) to feel connected to other people, and (3) because I can express myself freely. The PCM subscale achieved good internal consistency ($\alpha = .75$).

2.2.2.2. Decrease loneliness motives (DLM). These items indicated that participants use IM with the motive of decreasing their degree of loneliness. (1) because I need someone to talk to or be with, (2) because I just need to talk about problems sometimes, (3) because it makes me feel less lonely, and (4) so I would not have to feel so alone. The DLM subscale achieved good internal consistency ($\alpha = .83$).

2.2.2.3. Social ease motives (SEM). These items measured the extent to which participants use IM for practical or comfort motives. Participants were asked to answer how much they agreed with the following statements: I use instant messaging... (1) to feel less inhibited when I communicate, (2) because it is easier to send an IM than talk to people, (3) because it is more comfortable than talking to people face-to-face, and (4) to tell others what to do. Reliability analyses reported that the SEM subscale achieved good internal consistency ($\alpha = .76$) in this sample.

2.2.3. Shyness scale

A nine-item scale developed by Cheek and Buss (1981). Participants were asked to answer on a 5-point Likert-type scale how much they agreed (from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”) with each of nine statements, such as “I feel tense when I'm with people I don't know well” and “I feel inhibited in social situations.” The shyness scale achieved excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .93$) in this sample.

2.3. Procedure

Data were collected during the regular class period of three undergraduate classes in psychology and business. Participants

Table 1
Sample socio-demographic characteristics.

Characteristic	n	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Female	28	51.9
Male	26	48.1
<i>Age</i>		
18	21	38.9
19	25	46.3
20	3	5.6
21	2	3.7
22	2	3.7
23	1	1.9
<i>Class</i>		
Freshman	41	75.9
Sophomore	8	14.8
Junior	3	5.6
Senior	2	3.7

Table 2
Subscale intercorrelations for IM motives.

	Decrease loneliness motives	Social ease motives
Personal contact motives	.60	.54
Decrease loneliness motives		.44

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