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Stop Instant Messaging/Texting and Call Someone! The Downfalls of IM for Interpersonal Communication

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INTRODUCTION
Instant messaging (IM), text messaging, and other computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools are now frequent substitutes for face-to-face (ftf) and phone conversations (e.g., Shi & Lenhart, 2004; Smith, 2011). Researchers have therefore become interested in the equivalences in these technologies for fostering and sustaining relationships (Jiang, Bazarova, & Hancock, 2011; Walther, Loh, & Granka, 2005). In a recent study by Coonce and Drouin (2014), we examined differences between the three communication mediums in fostering compatibility in strangers. We found that IM conversations were far less constructive in fostering conversational compatibility than ftf or phone conversations. The way to approach the question of equivalency is to examine whether the three communication mediums (IM, voice, and ftf) differ in terms of their ability to help strangers form impressions of conversational partners’ personality traits and also whether they differ in conversational depth or content. These were the objectives of the present study. Our research questions were:

RQ1: Which communication medium (ftf, phone, or IM) do young adults prefer for their first conversation with a stranger?
RQ2: Which communication medium produces the greatest changes in personality assessments among strangers?
RQ3: Which communication medium facilitates the richest conversations among strangers?

METHODOLOGY
Young adult undergraduates (N=188) participated in dyads. Upon arrival, participants were introduced to their conversation partner and were then escorted to a private room where they completed an online survey. The survey included the following:

Personality—The Ten Item Personality Inventory (TIPI; Much, Hell, & Gosling, 2007) was used to measure participants’ conversation partner’s personality traits. Assessment items were scored using a 7-point Likert scale (1 = disagree strongly, 7 = agree strongly).

Likelihood of friendship—Three variables were combined to form a likelihood of friendship variable. People were asked about the extent to which their interaction partner was “Someone who has a lot of friends,” “A person with whom I would be close friends,” and “A person that would NOT be in my social group” (reverse coded) on a 1-7 likert scale (1 = disagree strongly, 7 = agree strongly). The Cronbach’s alpha for this composite variable before the interaction was ircraft and after the interaction is =.59. Next, participants were assigned randomly to one of three conditions:

After the interaction, participants completed the TIPI again and their conversations were transcribed and coded using:

• Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC; Pennebaker, et al., 2007)—LIWC analyzes written text on a word-by-word basis. We utilized the LIWC to determine whether there were differences in the linguistic content for the three communication conditions.

RESULTS
RQ1: When participants were asked how they would like to communicate with a stranger, 78% stated that they would like to communicate in a face-to-face setting. 12% indicated that they would like to use instant messaging. Only one participant indicated that they would like to use a voice call (Skype voice).

RQ2: As shown in Figure 2, the IM condition produced lesser gains in positive appraisals for most personality characteristics. There was a significant difference between groups only for conscientiousness (F(2, 183) = 3.597, p =.029). For emotionality and agreeableness, the differences between groups were nearly significant (p =.07 and p =.08, respectively). However, Bonferroni post-hoc analyses did not show significant group differences for any personality dimension. In terms of friendship, the IM condition produced the lowest positive change in likelihood of friendship. However, again, the differences between groups were not significant (p =.144).

DISCUSSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS
Most of the young adults in this study indicated that they would prefer their first conversation with a stranger to take place in a face-to-face context. A large portion of young adults in our sample also preferred to use IM when communicating with a stranger, but only one participant indicated that s/he would like to use a voice call for this initial conversation. Despite this, our results showed clearly that both face-to-face and phone conversations were superior to IM for impression formation. In other words, people formed more solid opinions about their conversational partners’ personality traits when they conversed face-to-face or on the phone rather than via IM. Additionally, those in the face-to-face and phone conditions were more likely than those in the IM condition to indicate that their conversational partner would be a friend. Finally, in terms of the conversational content, the IM conversations produced fewer quality interactions, as measured by the topics included in the LIWC analysis.

In this communication landscape, many people are using computer-mediated mediums to form relationships. Based on our results, we suggest that people avoid IM for at least their initial conversations with strangers. This has particular significance for those who use websites specifically to find a compatible mate (e.g., Match.com). Our results suggest that those individuals should choose face-to-face or phone conversations rather than IM so that they have a better chance of impression formation and a quality conversation. In the future, we intend to expand on this work to explore the conversational costs of text-based communication (like IM) for interpreting and conveying emotional content. As the social communication landscape is ever changing, the effect of different communication mediums on relationship formation and maintenance remains an active and important area of research.

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