Understanding Gender Differences in the Use of Instant Messaging

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Increasingly, Instant Messaging (IM) has been accepted as a communication and collaboration tool in many organizations (Hu, Wilcox, and Hansen 2002). Ferris Research predicted that the number of IM users will reach 183 million by 2007. Unlike other communication tools such as email and groupware, however, IM was initially designed for home users as a social networking tool to connect families and friends via the Internet and only gained its popularity in business after individual users started using IM as a substitute for face-to-face communication with co-workers. Thus, the adoption and use of IM in organizations have some unique characteristics. First, many corporate users may have had prior experience with IM before they begin to use it for business purposes. Second, the inherent social features of IM may affect how business users interact with each other and possibly change the ways in which business tasks are accomplished. These characteristics could have significant implications for promoting and managing IM use in organizations.

Li, Chau, and Lou (2005) examined IM adoption and use in a social context. Based on the motivation and interpersonal theories, they identified perceived usefulness, perceived enjoyment, relationship commitment, attachment motivation, and perceived critical mass as antecedents to intention to use of IM. Perceived enjoyment was found to play a central role in predicting intention to use. Different from prior studies, perceived enjoyment was found to have as significant effects on intention to use as perceived usefulness. One explanation was that the activities supported by IM in that study were social interactions as opposed to work-related activities. The effects of relationship commitment and attachment motivation on intention to use were also mediated by perceived enjoyment. Furthermore, the study showed that perceived critical mass had direct effects as well as indirect effects through perceived usefulness and perceived enjoyment on intention to use.

Gender has been suggested as one of the moderating factors in using IM (Ilie, Van Slyke, Green, and Lou 2005). Studies in sociology have shown that men and women hold different attitudes towards social interactions and have different communicate goals and patterns. For example, women are more likely to enjoy social-oriented activities, value connection and cooperation, and share emotions. Men, on the other hand, tend to focus on task-oriented activities and communicate based on social hierarchy (Meyers, Brashers, Winston & Grob 1997, Wood and Rhodes 1992). Taking the diffusion of innovation approach, Ilie, and her colleagues (2005) examined how gender moderated the impact of innovation characteristics on intention to use. They found that men and woman are different in a number of ways. Ease of use and visibility were found to be more important to intention to use for women than for men. On the other hand, relative advantage, result demonstrability, and perceived critical mass were more important for men.

This research focuses on the role of gender in IM adoption from a social and interpersonal perspective. Specifically, we examine whether gender moderates the relationship between perceived usefulness, perceived enjoyment, relationship commitment, attachment motivation, and perceived critical mass and the intention to use of IM. Data was collected using a survey of IM users. Preliminary analysis shows that the impact of the above social factors on intention to use was very different for men and women. Final results will be presented at the conference.