

INSTANT access

Quick, easy online messaging is a popular mode of communication
for high school and college students

INSTANT MESSAGING USE

- 70 percent of teens with Internet access have used instant messaging
- 44 percent of online adults have used instant message
- 7 in 10 teens use instant messaging at least several times a week
- 48 percent of teens say instant messaging improves relationships with their friends; 71 percent still use the phone most often
- 90 percent of those who use instant messaging say they use the service to stay in touch with friends and relatives who live outside their communities

Pew Internet and
American Life Project

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Emily Hawks, tired from playing softball, sits down at her computer desk and instantly perks up.

Like many high school and college students today, the 15-year-old uses an instant message service. Talking to friends online has become the newest — and cheapest — way to hang out. Whether it is chatting, doing homework or simply procrastinating, teens are spending more and more time hunkered over keyboards talking to friends and family.

Instant messaging exploded on the computer scene in 1996 with the introduction of a service known as ICQ. America Online soon followed suit with its service, AIM. These days, a plethora of instant messaging tools are available to download.

The popularity of instant messaging has to do with its simplicity. Many teens say going online to chat with friends is easier than using the phone.

For those who are not computer savvy, instant messaging allows real-time text conversations with people simultaneously connected to the Internet. You maintain a list of contacts, often called a buddy list, that are stored in your computer. Click on a name, and up pops a conversation.

Instant message services are popular for reasons other than ease of use. Instant messaging allows people to carry on multiple conversations at once. This is a big reason why teens, including Tiffany Burks of Hickman High School, admit to spending at least three hours a night on her service talking to all her friends on AOL.

Allison Cooper, a sophomore at Hickman, says having multiple conversations is exactly why she uses instant messaging.

"You can talk to like 10 friends as opposed to just one," Allison said.

Another feature many teen-agers enjoy is the ability to make new friends online. Allison believes teen-agers like instant messaging because you can talk to people you normally would not call. The initial fear of how to start a conversation is not as great with text screens. Teens can simply type hello and wait for an answer.

"It also makes it a lot easier to talk to people you might not know too well, because you don't have the pressure of talking to them face-to-face and running out of things to say," said 15-year-old Becky Hale.

Besides allowing kids to talk to many friends at once, instant messaging allows users to multitask. Becky said she uses instant messaging to talk to friends while she is doing her homework and watching television. Instant

messaging is a vital aspect in the social lives of high schoolers. Students say it's a good way to find out what everyone is doing for the weekend.

Hale said she uses instant messaging and the phone at the same time to make her weekend plans.

Some users believe instant messaging is vital to young people because of the restrictions of being in high school.

"In high school, when you go home from school, you're home. You can't really be with your friends. It's a substitute for hanging out," said Susie Siemer, an MU junior.

Instant messaging can also be important for college students. While high school students seem to stay with one service, some college students are running multiple instant message services at once.

Katie Mellinger, a 21-year-old Stephens College student, admits to having three different providers on her computer, mostly because it allows her to talk to friends back home.

"I moved around a lot and made many connections with people from all over. It allows me to keep in contact with them without paying a lot of money," Mellinger said.

The fact that instant messaging can be downloaded for free was a big draw for MU students Zach Whitehead and Pat Rippe.

"It's a cheap way to stay in touch with friends," Whitehead said.

Rippe said all his friends use it.

"It's easy to use, it's cheap and everyone has it,"

Rippe said.

Although both admitted that they ran several services, both were reluctant to admit how much time they spent online.

That may be because both high school and college students can spend a large amount of time procrastinating with instant messaging.

"It is definitely a procrastination tool. I'll be like I should be doing homework ... let's see who's online," Mellinger said.

The parents of teens and young adults are not as enthusiastic about such services. Some of them don't even know what instant messaging services are.

Chris Harper, a 20-year-old MU junior, said his parents believe instant messaging and e-mail are the same.

"They couldn't figure out IM to save their life,"

Rippe said of his parents.

Some parents, however, use and accept such services.

Mellinger said her parents get excited that they know how to use instant messaging.

"My mother loves it," Mellinger said. "She can't get enough of it."

TOP MESSAGE SERVICES

ICQ:

Download at
www.icq.com

Advantages: ICQ, which boasts a worldwide following, contains a message history feature that keeps all exchanges for future reference. You can send messages to people — even if they are offline — and they will receive them the next time they log on. Another plus: the text window only pops up when you double click the flashing icon, so you can answer when you're ready. Contacts must have your approval before becoming a part of your list.

Disadvantages: If you switch computers, you have to update your buddy list from scratch. If you have to log on again on another computer, the login name is a long number that is difficult to remember.

Yahoo Messenger:

Download at messenger.yahoo.com

Advantages: Yahoo contains a fun range of emoticons, or emotion icons, that you can send in your text messages. As with ICQ, you can send messages to people offline. It also offers e-mail intergration, file transfer and message alerts.

Disadvantages: There is no peer-to-peer file transfer and there is a limit of 500k on transfers. Yahoo relies on user profiles that are searchable on Yahoo's central database, but it is not a simple solution to distributing contact lists.

MSN:

Download at
www.messenger.msn.com

Advantages: MSN allows you to set up an "allow" list and notifies you whenever someone wants to add you to their list. Contacts are stored on MSN servers so you can access them from any machine. Incoming hotmail alerts let you know if you have an incoming e-mail or instant message. There is also an alert that tells you when a contact is writing a message back to you. As with Yahoo and ICQ, there is an offline command where you can see who's online, but they cannot see you.

Disadvantages: You have to have a hotmail account and so do your contacts. The incoming hotmail alerts only appear for a few seconds so it's hard to click on them fast. You cannot send offline clients messages. You can e-mail, but only through hotmail.

AOL:

Download at
www.aol.com/aim/homenew.adp

Advantages: AIM has the best file-sharing ability. If you are behind a firewall, you can connect using a proxy server like Socks 4, Socks 5 and SHTTP protocols. You can group your contact lists and send your contact lists to other users. AIM preference menu allows for maximum control over text and messages.

Disadvantages: Other users can add you without your approval, and they will always know when you are online. You cannot send or check e-mail directly from the client.