

# A Case Study of a Family's Digital Technology Use

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Teenagers in the United States are rapidly adopting emerging digital technologies, around which they create complex social practices, such as instant messaging, text messaging, and online video gaming (Kaiser Family Foundation & San Jose Mercury News, 2003; Lenhart, Rainie, & Lewis, 2001). Embedded in these online social practices are technologically-mediated conversations in which teens explore their identities, gain information, develop cybercultures, create communication styles and patterns, and learn socialization skills.

The goal of this paper is to illuminate how one mother and her teenaged children view their digital-mediated communication practices. It is situated in a larger qualitative study which seeks to understand how teens' online social practices change the way teens communicate, how teens interact and form relationships with peers and family members, and the types of skills they learn as they create these social practices surrounding the technology. This is not a study of the technology itself but of youths' complex social, cultural, and learning practices mediated through technology.

This case study includes two qualitative methods: interviews and observations. Semi-structured questions are asked to explore teens' practices and perceptions surrounding instant messaging and to learn about family communication. I also conduct observations of the teens as they are instant messaging.

To understand teen instant messaging, their online social practice is examined through the lenses of situated learning and learning as participating in a community of practice (Wenger & Lave, 1991). Other concepts I employ to analyze teen instant messaging and family communication include: a) identity and online identity; b) cyberculture and cyberspace; and c) social aspects of learning.

This case study suggests instant messaging contains communication that is crucial, from teens' perspectives, to maintaining intimate friendship bonds with peers as well as to developing new friendships and romantic relationships. Instant messaging allows for teens to explore their identity and to participate in a space where they come to see and be seen. Technology use that is perceived as important to some family members may not be important to other members of the family as illustrated by the differing views of cellular phone technologies. Another finding is that cellular phones provide this parent opportunities to support her teens in a new timeframe and in places where she does not have access, such as school time. Using her cell phone, the mother is able to meet her need to enhance her parental involvement.

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