Navigating the Unspoken: Understanding Silence and Blocking in Instant Messaging

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KEYWORDS	ABSTRACT
instant-messaging, blocking, interpersonal relationships, mental health	Instant messaging, a widely used method of contemporary communication, connecting individuals across distances while also shaping their emotional experiences. The present study is a qualitative exploration to understand the nuanced emotional and psychological experiences associated with instant messaging (IM) in various interpersonal contexts among undergraduate students. Using a purposive sampling method, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to analyze the transcripts. Eight themes were generated: Messaging as a Communication Catalyst; Emojis: Feelings in Icons; Expected Responsiveness Parameters; Communication Silence: Reasons and Strategies; Silent Blue: Digital Rejection; Blocking: Out of Sight, Out of Mind; Emotional Terrain in Group Chats; and Cognitive Disquiet and Emotional Strain. The findings highlight the impact of instant messaging (IM) on mental health and the intricate dynamics of digital communication, enhancing our understanding of its emotional impact on users. .

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The rise of smartphones and the use of social media have led to a hybridization of relationships, combining online and offline interactions through instant messaging applications. This has shifted face-to-face conversations to phone calls and text messaging (Jaafar et al., 2014). Young adults, in particular, prefer texting over face-to-face communication in various situations (Chen & Toma, 2023). Instant messaging (IM) has become an integral part of people's lives, allowing them to connect with friends, family, colleagues, and clients (Krasnova et al., 2018). Interactions on IM platforms follow a three-stage process: initiation, expectation, and response (Murphy, 2018). Failing to respond to a direct message on social media may be seen as impolite.

Being left on read: Interpretation of silence during IM

Using IM gives rise to the expectation that the recipient will immediately view and read a message, typically within a few minutes or instantly (Church & Oliveira, 2013). When these expectations are not met, individuals may experience negative emotions like rejection and feeling ignored, leading to feelings of loneliness and depression (Vanherle, 2023). Previous studies found that delayed or slow responses can cause anxiety, stress, guilt, and negatively impacting the

sender's mental well-being, especially in urgent situations (Lin, 2012; Murphy, 2018). Research has shown that features like "read receipts" and "last seen" create social pressures and unrealistic expectations for quick responses (Pielot et al., 2014). These features also encourage obsessive-checking behavior and increase anxiety when messages are read but not replied to (Ahad & Liam, 2014; Lynden & Rasmussen, 2017). With this in mind, the present study aims to address the following research questions:

1. What are people's expectations and perceptions about instant messaging response times?
2. How do people respond to 'being left on read', and how do they interpret such silence?

Role of Emojis in Instant Messaging

Digital text, unlike traditional books or letters, often includes graphical symbols like emoticons and emojis, which enhance text by providing additional information. Emojis are visual symbols that convey meaning by providing contextual signals or substituting words (Bai et al., 2019; Völkel et al., 2019). The frequency and diversity of emoji and emoticon usage vary based on user demographics (Herring & Dainas, 2020; Koch, Romero & Stachl, 2022).

Blocking on Instant Messaging

Social media interactions can lead to misunderstandings and increased anxiety in friendships, as responses depend on message visibility and the receiver's choice to respond. This uncertainty can exacerbate feelings of ghosting or a lack of care. The recipient's tendency to cease conversations pertains to three detrimental approaches to breaking friendships and interpersonal relationships on social media: unfriending, blocking, and ghosting. Blocking behavior can lead to ostracism, a deliberate disregard for an individual or group (Waldeck et al., 2017). Studies have found a correlation between being ignored online (cyber ostracism) and experiencing psychological distress, emotional dysregulation, loneliness, depression, and anxiety (Davidson et al., 2019; Trimmer et al., 2017). Other factors contributing to blocking include mistrust, conflicts in behavior, arguments, loss of romance, personality differences, and acts of betrayal (Gashi & Knautz, 2016). Furthermore, negative behavior such as committing offenses, engaging in misconduct, breaking rules, and betraying one's partner can also lead to relationship deterioration. Thus, the present research also addresses the following research questions:

3. Why do people block others in interpersonal relationships or groups?
4. What effects can blocking behaviour have on interpersonal relationships and group dynamics?

Instant Messaging and Group Chats

Bakey, Unal, and Arslan's (2023) research on the impact of instant messaging group dynamics on individuals' mental and emotional health found that users often accept disturbing situations, such as privacy invasions, harassment, hurtful behavior, and gender discrimination, due to fear of conflict, misunderstanding, or isolation. The primary reasons for this include fear of flagrancy, work problems, authority, and misunderstood responses, being alone, being guilty, and abstaining from conflict. Cultural influences such as respect for authority and traditions can also contribute to issues regarding the acceptance of such situations.

Instant Messaging and Mental Health

Despite their convenience, IM applications sometimes give rise to challenges and unpleasant situations. Research has demonstrated that individuals may have a sense of pressure to quickly reply to messages, resulting in heightened levels of stress and anxiety (Wang et al., 2021). Any delays can lead to IM anxiety for the senders, who may experience excessive and frequent checking of the instant messaging window, as well as a complete inability to focus on any other task. Hoyle et al. (2017), in their study, found that real-time information on Facebook Messenger

can influence sender expectations and perceptions of response time, evoking unpleasant emotions. Moreover, the absence of nonverbal cues in IM can lead to misinterpretation and misunderstandings, potentially resulting in conflict and negative emotions (Krasnova et al., 2018). With this in mind, the following question will be addressed:

5. How does the use of IM impact the mental health of people?

Despite the ubiquity of instant messaging in contemporary communication, there is a dearth of qualitative exploration on this subject in India that delves into the interpretative and experiential aspects of instant messaging. The objective of this study is to address this lacuna by attempting to understand the social and psychological components of IM using a qualitative approach.

Method

Participants

The study comprised ten undergraduate students, with an equal number of males and females as participants studying in Delhi, NCR, ranging in age from 18 to 22 years, using purposive sampling technique.

Materials and Procedure

Online and in-person semi-structured interviews were conducted after obtaining informed consent. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, pseudo-names were given to the participants, and all the identifiable information was removed from the transcripts. The interview questions were spread across five sections covering general use and perceptions of using IM apps, expectations and reactions to response time, blocking and group dynamics in IM, and relationship anxiety. When necessary, probing questions were asked. The duration of each interview lasted between 20 to 45 minutes.

Data Analysis

We first audio-recorded the interviews and then transcribed them. NVIVO 14 was used for data analysis and management. Using a social constructionist approach and focusing on the semantic level of the data, we conducted reflective thematic analysis with an inductive or data-driven approach. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommended six-phase reflexive thematic analysis process, which included data familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing the themes, defining and identifying them, and finally writing the analysis, these processes were taken to find, analyze, and report recurrent and relevant patterns seen in the data.

The researchers read transcripts and listened to the audios to familiarize themselves with the data. They generated initial codes and analysed them in-depth to discover patterns and themes. Through a process of continuous reflection, all three researchers actively re-immersed themselves in the data multiple times, re-establishing themes and sub-themes after multiple changes. The finalization of themes and sub-themes was reached after consensus form all the three authors.

Results

The present analysis resulted in the development of eight themes and twenty-nine sub-themes, described in Table 1.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Findings

The qualitative enquiry commenced with exploring participants purpose, usage, and various app preferences for using IM. The finding revealed that most of the participants use IM apps to stay in touch with their friends and family and with people they are not in regular contact with on a daily basis. We identified eight themes, which are described in detail below:

Theme 1: Messaging as a Communication Catalyst

The theme and sub-themes encapsulate the role of messaging as a communication catalyst in aiding interpersonal relationships in this digital age. IM plays a huge role in maintenance of interpersonal relationships. Participants expressed, *"I mean, I love how I can communicate to my mom. She's quite far away. So, this is the only thing I can, like WhatsApp"* (Rani), *"I find it very easy. I can message to them… that would make me feel good"* (Damini). Moreover, messaging acts as a conversation starter for many and helps relay work information. Harsh suggested, *"Basically, as I consider myself an ambivert, so I can connect with people, new people, easily. As I tend to be hesitant…through mobile phones like calling and that I like about the instant messaging applications,"* and *"when it comes to reading information, let's say about work, about life, anything, I prefer instant messaging"* (Vanya). Lastly, IM further helps to articulate their thoughts before presenting them to the other person: "*You have a few seconds even if you are talking continuously. You think of something. You process it. And then you type in the thing. So, these few seconds make a lot of impact"* (Abhishek) as well as providing instant relief by connecting with others on an instant basis.

Theme 2: Emoji's: Feelings in Icons

This theme and sub-themes describe how emojis play a role in expressing emotions and the tone of message in IM. A number of participants reported using emojis to convey emotions. *"Emojis, they can help sometimes, you can express your emotions through emojis"* (Jaya). Emojis play a crucial role in modern communication, serving as an essential texting aid. Vanya, one of the participants, stated, "*When I am also interested in talking to that person, usage of emojis eases my stress."* It is rightly noted that 'No emojis, no emotions", as a participant expressed, *"when I make a conversation and it's just plain texting. That seems very formal. And, like, the person I am talking to is not interested"* (Abhishek). They enrich digital exchanges with their multifaceted expressions of emotion and meaning, highlighting the importance of emojis in conveying depth and emotional resonance. Moreover, many participants reported using emojis to signal the end of the conversation: "*I think in Gen Z, to stop a conversation, I think most of us do just throw an emoji out, and that's supposed to mean, like it's an unwritten rule that it's supposed to end the conversation, so get the hint, and just, I don't want to talk to you anymore"* (Abhishek).

Theme 3: Expected Responsiveness Parameters

Many participants reported that various factors influence their expectations and perceptions of receiving replies, making it a prominent theme. People tend to identify the texting patterns that affect their expectations for receiving responses. "*I see what are the texting patterns like, there are different things we analyze. Like, what is the time that a person takes to reply to one message? How frequent is the conversation? So, when you do not know the pattern, that will make you think different things, while when you know of the pattern, then you will react accordingly"* (Abhishek).

Many also expressed a preference for receiving instant reply after sending the message *"Instantly, it's an instant messaging app so I want a reply instantly. So if we talk about time, within 5 minutes, I think it's proper etiquette; it's proper digital etiquette, I believe"* (Dev). Participants emphasized that the type of message dictated the timing of receiving the response; most of them expected an immediate reply to urgent and emergency messages and were less concerned if it was a casual or informal message, like, for example, a meeting or just catching up. **"***It depends on the kind of message I'm sending. If my message is, let's say, urgent, or it's something to do with an emergency in the family, I would expect an instant reply to something within 5 or 10 minutes"* (Vanya). Lastly, some felt that the timing of receiving the response reflects the priority the sender holds in the receiver's life: *"As long as it's an urgent message and you have not texted, then I would be like, okay, now I know where I stand in your list or whatever"* (Damini).

Theme 4: Communication Silence: Reasons and Strategies

This theme explores how an individual's tendency to respond is affected by the importance of the message content and relationship with the receiver, along with intentionally using silence in digital communication to avoid conflict escalation and reduce anxiety. It was found that 'leaving people on read' can act as a deliberate move to avoid the escalation of conflict. A participant added, "*Most of the time, I am too involved in situations in which I get mad. And then I say things that I shouldn't have said. I just leave them 'on read'* (Asha). This avoidance strategy gives an opportunity to calm down and becomes a crucial factor to avoiding unnecessary arguments. Several individuals also reported the practice of disabling read receipts as a means of managing anxiety associated with the status of their messages. This approach introduces ambiguity regarding the acknowledgment of a communication, so alleviating the urgency to provide a fast response. Furthermore, managing reply time expectation depends upon the relationship with the receiver and the type of message. A participant said that *"It depends on the person; if they are close to me, then I reply instantly, Or within 5 minutes to 1-hour time period but if they are quite distant and the message is not valued, it's a normal message then I would may be ghost them; may be reply later"* (Dev).

Theme 5: Silent Blue: Digital Rejection

Sometimes, conversations are left hanging, and some may experience being 'left on read' on IM applications, leading to an emotional impact. While it may sound subtle, many participants revealed that it causes various negative emotional reactions such as feelings of isolation, neglect, overthinking, self-doubt, anger, and sadness when their messages are 'left on read'. Participants expressed that "*I feel very bad; I feel like very neglected"* (Asha); *it gives me a lot of anxiety"* (Rani). To add to that, the turmoil following digital rejection is strongly dependent on the relationship with the sender. As Asha expressed, *"If its someone I am not close to or I am not well connected with, I am okay with it and for my family because they are not much into texting, I know that they are not going to reply to every text I send, so I am okay with them, but for my close friends, I don't want to be the last person left unseen"*. Others also reported that being 'left on read' by someone new leads to overthinking and self-doubt. Negative emotions associated with being 'left on read' can be tackled when the other person acknowledges their busyness and commitment, which allows the sender to understand the situation better and reduces their anxiety. Jaya described this as *"just letting me know that they're busy. I cannot just assume, right, that they're busy, which will make me less anxious."*

Theme 6: Blocking: Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Blocking is an important feature of IM applications that is best known for its help for security reasons; "*if it's with an unknown person, then blocking signifies protection or, like, safety for me*" (Vanya). As Dev correctly stated, *"blocking allows out of sight, out of mind,"* which liberates people and enables them to move on from the other person, *"like you want to move from the person. 'Move on', as they say in our Gen Z language. So that becomes tough when you are on social media. You have that urge that what happened was wrong. I should text them again or reconnect to them. So, blocking helps you with that part in some manner"* (Abhishek) and help remove toxicity in their lives. *"I'm very thankful I blocked him. I mean, if I would not have, I would have been in a very toxic environment, or not in a good environment"* (Damini). It assists in filtered engagement on all applications, deciding who to be in contact with and who to avoid; even mutual blocking reflects an act of deciding to part ways together when things are not working out. One participant expressed, "*When things end mutually… because both of you want to move ahead in your lives. So then blocking will help you*" (Asha). Participants expressed that it gives them a sense of control to choose who can reach out to them.

Theme 7: Emotional Terrain in Group Chats

Group chats are a mini replica of the social world we face outside and, at times, can become more overwhelming than one-on-one conversations. In an instant messaging program, Emotional Terrain in Group Chats investigates the profound emotional effects that people go through when they are suddenly removed or voluntarily leave a group. According to Asha, it forces a person to set their boundaries in order to deal with self-doubt and safeguard themselves from potential harm. "*I was very uncomfortable with it, so I decided I would just stay out of it. You can't just tell people to shut up all the time so that's why I left the group*". Dev, another participant, stated that, "*I was a little sad. I doubted myself. I always thought that maybe I was not good enough to be a part of that group anymore. So that's why I was removed,"* escalating feelings of anger and frustration. "Let*'s say they've removed me in an anger state; I'm completely okay. I feel the same resentment. It actually creates frustration"* (Vanya). *"The emotion that I would have from the person would be, first it would be offensive that I have been removed from, that the schema that I and that person hold is now public, like, it has been announced in the group that has been made public, so it would be pretty offensive"* (Yuvan). Participants expressed that experiencing exclusion and rejection in online groups (cyber ostracism) resulted in feeling insulted and humiliated. One of the participants expressed, *"I feel like 'being removed from the group' is more public. Other people in the group can see that and it could be more of an insult to the person"* (Rani).

Theme 8: Cognitive Disquiet and Emotional Strain

Instant messaging was also found to have a negative impact on mental health. Many participants felt apprehension due to response interpretations where the tone and context of the message are often misinterpreted, leading to misunderstandings and stress. A participant expressed: "*I feel like on messages… the reader gets to perceive what tone they want the message to be read in, so misinterpreted, can be misleading"* (Rani). Frequent thoughts of overthinking and self-doubt, particularly when there is a slight change in texting patterns or when messages are left unread, were also prevalent. A participant expressed that when someone takes an excessive amount of time to react or abruptly alters their texting style, they begin to question themselves and contemplate whether they have made an error. Many participants expressed feeling angry when

the conversation abruptly ended or when they perceived intentional disregard. Anxiety was also common, especially when conveying formal messages or being left hanging during the conversation. A participant reported a lack of prompt reaction to crucial signals; particularly in professional contexts, talking to a new person causes significant anxiety. "*When I'm, like, really into that person and I want them to text me and they're not, I get anxious*" (Jaya)*; "like you know, when there's the typing thing coming on but even for like 3-4 minutes the person doesn't send a text, it gets very anxious*" (Rani). These negative emotional responses demonstrate the profound influence that instant messaging can have on mental health, causing cognitive and emotional strain.

Discussion

Instant messaging apps have become a necessary part of modern society, providing convenience but also leading to difficulties and uncomfortable situations (Krasnova et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2021). Initially, we endeavored to understand the purposes and preferences of the participants while using IM, which subsequently gave rise to the first theme, "Messaging as a Communication Catalyst.", which revealed that participants primarily use IM to maintain connections with friends and family, using apps like WhatsApp and Instagram for different types of communication. Furthermore, IM provides immediate convenience, instant relief, and emotional support in the digital age.The data revealed the theme "Emojis: Feelings in Icons," with emojis playing a crucial role in conveying emotions and tone in IM and enriching digital exchanges, which has been established by previous studies (Bai et al., 2019).

The first research question was aimed to investigate people's expectations and perceptions regarding response times in IM, which lead to unfolding of two themes: "Expected Responsiveness Parameters" and "Communication Silence: Reasons and Strategies." The findings indicated that several factors influence response time management, perceptions, and evaluations, including relevance of the message, the availability of the recipient, user activity signals, the relationship between the sender and receiver, the recipient's inclination to respond, and the number of recipients. This understanding of digital etiquette aligns with Expectancy Violations Theory (Burgoon, 1993), which suggests that deviations from expected communication behaviors can elicit emotional responses. In the context of IM, silence is employed as a deliberate strategy to manage conflict and anxiety and regulate emotions.

The second research question posed was, "How do people respond to 'being left on read', and how do they interpret such silence?" which led to the unfolding of the fifth theme, "Silent Blue: Digital Rejection." The study highlighted the emotional impact of being 'left on read', highlighting the need for transparent communication to mitigate the negative effects of digital rejection. Consistent with Sociometer Theory (Leary, 1999), which suggests that social inclusion and exclusion significantly impacts self-esteem and emotional well-being.

The third and fourth research questions explored the reasons behind people blocking others in interpersonal relationships or groups, as well as the impact of blocking behavior on interpersonal relationships and group dynamics. The findings resulted in two themes "Blocking: Out of Sight, Out of Mind" and "Emotional Terrain in Group Chat". Participants stated that blocking is important for maintaining personal safety and removing toxic influences from our digital lives. This practice aligns with Boundary Management Theory (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000), where individuals create boundaries to protect their emotional well-being. Further, group chats present emotional complexity, as participants stated that they experience distress when removed

from groups, perceiving it as a public and humiliating act. Williams (2009) highlights the emotional impact of cyber ostracism, causing feelings of social pain similar to physical pain, highlighting the emotional stakes of digital exclusion.

The final research question addressed the impact of IM usage on mental health of the participants. The study uncovered that IM has a negative impact on mental health, including misinterpretations of tone, overthinking, and anxiety triggered by changes in messaging patterns or delayed responses, leading to the emergence of the theme "Cognitive Disquiet and Emotional Strain". The absence of non-verbal cues in digital communication often leads to misunderstandings, causing cognitive and emotional strain. Previous studies have found that IM can have a detrimental effect on mental health (Bakey et al., 2023; Krasnova et al., 2018). The findings of this study emphasize the necessity of implementing digital literacy programs aimed at assisting users in effectively managing emotional difficulties encountered in instant messaging.

The study has limitations, including reliance on self-reported data, which is subject to bias, and a lack of demographic diversity. Future studies should explore the long-term impact on mental health due to the use of instant messaging, including diverse samples.

Conclusion

The use of IM and social media platforms can have both positive and negative impacts on communication, cooperation, and individual welfare. Clear guidelines and active oversight are crucial to preventing disruptive behaviors and privacy violations. Implementing restrictions and strategic organization can optimize platform benefits. The above findings not only reflect the perspective of undergraduate students about instant messaging but also have implications for future intervention research and many stakeholders, including policymakers, counselors, and educators.

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Table 1

Themes and sub-themes:

Themes	Sub-Themes
Messaging as a Communication Catalyst	Maintenance of Interpersonal Relationships Conversation Starter Work Information Articulated Thoughts Instant Relief
Emojis: Feelings in Icons	Texting Aid Multifaceted Emojis No Emojis, No Emotions Emotive Endings
Expected Responsiveness Parameters	Identifying Texting Patterns Instant Reply Expectation Message Type Influence
Communication Silence: Reasons and Strategies	Avoiding Escalation of Conflict Silent Message Notification Managing Reply Time Expectations
Silent Blue: Digital Rejection	Busyness Acknowledgment

	Negative Emotional Reaction Relationship with Sender
Blocking: Out of Sight, Out of Mind	Filtered Engagement Liberation and Removing Toxicity Mutual Blocking Security Concerns
Emotional Terrain in Group Chats	Anger and Frustration Boundary Settings Cyber Ostracism
Cognitive Disquiet and Emotional Strain	Response Interpretation Apprehensions Overthinking and Self-doubt Anger Anxiety