

# Communication Decisions: Why Call vs. Poke?

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**Abstract.** We conducted preliminary research on young adult communication behaviors, collecting a matrix of factors that influence college students' decisions with converging communications technologies. This paper describes our early studies and the promising results that are driving our future research.

**Keywords:** ubiquitous communication, communication behaviors

## 1 Introduction

Why do young adults choose to poke instead of email, text message, call or IM? Why one method versus another? There have been many reasons studied, but with fewer available methods/devices converging across situations and network access [1, 2].

Although the mobile communications industry is focusing on youth (ages 5-14) [3], we are interested in young adults. This segment, while not typically early adopters of technology, can be "innovative adopters." They take existing technology and use it in ways different from other populations or what designers intended. For example, a high-frequency tone meant to deter loitering teens from stores was passed along as a ringtone for students seeking to receive calls without detection. This unintended application was quickly appreciated by youth and young adults [4]. We speculate that today's young adults will transform communications habits later in life with their innovative adoptions, and these innovations will make an impact on others as well. For example, did designers of the first IM clients understand that "instant" messaging established presence and was a kid magnet? Workers installed IM clients for task efficiency, yet market analysis shows that youth are still the heavy users [5, 6, 7]. Will today's youth's IM habits fade with maturity, or will they be comfortable with, reliant upon, or deliberate with presence-based communication in adult life? [8]

We plan to logistically define the communications of today's young adults to inform the design of future services. We conducted interviews, surveys, and focus groups.

## 2 Pilot Studies

### 2.1 Interviews

We interviewed seven undergraduates about their routines, whom they communicate with, and how they make communication decisions. The results of these early interviews indicated that decisions strongly depend on two factors:

- **Relationship** – from most intimate to complete stranger
- **Purpose** – from extremely important to completely trivial

### 2.2 Questionnaire

Nineteen undergraduates, ages 18-22, filled out a questionnaire with items such as: “When are you more likely to **text** someone on your mobile phone as opposed to any other alternatives?” We identified four additional factors:

- **Affect** – from very emotional to very non-emotional
- **Composition time** – from very quick to very slow
- **Desire for fast response** – from very high to very low
- **Expected duration** – from very extended to very brief

### 2.3 Focus Groups

We ran two pilot focus groups with 13 students, ages 18-23. Participants identified the communication method they would most likely use depending on the state of the six factors identified during the interviews and questionnaires, and defined above.

Participants answered ‘what-if’ scenarios tailored to combine factors of strangers vs. intimate, school vs. socializing, time constraints, and other variables. For example: “You are meeting up with your boyfriend/girlfriend for dinner immediately after work, but your boss is keeping you past your shift. You estimate that you are going to be about 20 minutes late. How would you choose to contact your significant other?”

These pilots will be refined into larger-scale studies. Our pilots led us to interesting directions and findings.

## 3 Why call vs. poke: Factors affecting method choices

There are certainly many other factors that affect why someone chooses one method over another (e.g., cost, roaming, access to addresses and directories), but our initial

research led us to these: affect, relationship, composition time, desire for a fast response, expected duration, purpose, privacy and cognitive readiness.

In our pilots we not only unearthed these factors, but also validated how each influences communication. For example, our data indicate that for young adults, email is an old, formal pipe. Although some argue that high-frequency email indicates strong social ties [9], our data do not bear that out. It appears that, for US college students, email may be a dinosaur used mostly to reach professors, employers or sometimes family. Students favor texting and IMing when they communicate with friends and peers, and calling is often saved for parents.

Relationship, however, is not the only influential factor. Location and context of both the initiator and the intended recipient also affects decisions. When young adults are bored, they will often choose to text others (friends or classroom acquaintances) or wander around on the social networking sites, but are less likely to make phone calls.

When it is expected that the recipient is occupied and unavailable for real time communication, young adults make calculated decisions, as indicated clearly in this questionnaire verbatim: “If I think they are in class I will text them.” Also included in the concept of context is awareness of who is around to see or hear the communication. One focus group participant remarked that she would be more likely to call her boyfriend than text him when she is at work and wants to quickly communicate that she’ll be late. The reason she gave for this decision is that she worried about the perception her boss would have of her if she were observed texting.

We also discovered that young adults use earbud “signals.” Wearing both buds indicates one is unavailable for face-to-face talk, yet wearing one bud conveys one is interruptible even when in conversation with others. As communication devices offer newer audio services that promote the use of buds or headsets, we expect this signaling to become more prevalent and recognized.

While these results may not surprise someone who spends significant time on a U.S. college campus, they give us the confirmation that our research method for discovering, validating and measuring these factors affecting communication is on the right track.

Therefore, we are continuing to explore *how* each factor impacts choices, and beginning to examine *which* factors are more influential, and how the factors interact with each other. We are considering other research methods, including monitoring, moblogging and ethnographic studies to further our understanding of these factors. How do young adults choose to communicate? Answering these questions will influence service and feature designs for intelligence-aided and intuitive, ubiquitous communications technologies.

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