

Georgia State University

## ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University

---

University Library Faculty Publications

Georgia State University Library

---

12-2006

### What Are We Afraid Of? A Survey of Librarian Opinions and Misconceptions Regarding Instant Messenger.

Sarah Steiner

Georgia State University, [ssteiner@gsu.edu](mailto:ssteiner@gsu.edu)

Casey Long

Georgia State University, [caseylong@gsu.edu](mailto:caseylong@gsu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/univ\\_lib\\_facpub](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/univ_lib_facpub)



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Steiner, Sarah and Long, Casey, "What Are We Afraid Of? A Survey of Librarian Opinions and Misconceptions Regarding Instant Messenger." (2006). *University Library Faculty Publications*. 13. [https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/univ\\_lib\\_facpub/13](https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/univ_lib_facpub/13)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Georgia State University Library at ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in University Library Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ Georgia State University. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@gsu.edu](mailto:scholarworks@gsu.edu).

# **What Are We Afraid Of? A Survey of Librarian Opinions and Misconceptions Regarding Instant Messenger**

Sarah K. Steiner  
Casey M. Long

**SUMMARY.** Buzz about instant messaging (IM) customer service is becoming louder, both inside and outside the library field. In general, librarian opinions of IM are mixed and at times even combative. A survey was distributed to gather librarians' opinions of the usefulness of IM as compared to its feature-rich yet difficulty-prone sibling, commercial chat. Through detailed statistical analysis, this article provides an overview of trends in and opinions of IM reference, and offers analysis of its present and future in libraries.

**KEYWORDS.** Virtual reference service, real-time reference, survey, instant messaging

Sarah K. Steiner (E-mail: [libsck@langate.gsu.edu](mailto:libsck@langate.gsu.edu)) is a Learning Commons Librarian, and Casey M. Long (E-mail: [libcml@langate.gsu.edu](mailto:libcml@langate.gsu.edu)) is a Business Librarian, both at Georgia State University in Atlanta.

Address correspondence to the authors at: University Library, 100 Decatur Street SE, Atlanta, GA, 30303.

# **What Are We Afraid Of? A Survey of Librarian Opinions and Misconceptions Regarding Instant Messenger**

## ***INTRODUCTION***

In recent years instant messaging (IM) has been widely discussed as a potential virtual reference tool for academic libraries. Even so, aside from information available in informal weblog and message board posts, little has been published regarding the general climate of librarian opinions of IM reference. Additionally, there is little documentation of how librarians who have implemented IM feel about its quality and impact in the library setting. The purpose of this survey study is to provide data regarding these opinions, highlight some of the misconceptions that haunt IM reference, and gauge the climate that surrounds it.

## ***BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION***

### ***What Is IM?***

Instant messenger is an application that allows the user to participate in real-time Internet conversations. The most commonly used IM platforms are AIM, MSN, and Yahoo! Messenger. Throughout this paper the authors will distinguish between IM and the commercial chat programs currently used by most libraries (such as QuestionPoint and LSSI) by referring to the former as “IM” and the latter as “chat.” This distinction

has been created for the sake of clarity, since the terms can be used interchangeably in both common speech and professional publication.

IM and chat operate similarly, and are both intended to provide instantaneous point-of-need customer service. Chat programs, the more feature-rich descendants of simple IM, typically offer cobrowsing, page-pushing, automatic statistics gathering, and user satisfaction surveys. Finally, most chat programs make it easy for a group of libraries to staff collaboratively in order to provide more complete coverage.

While chat may seem like the obviously superior program, IM also boasts many advantages. Its simplistic and lightweight interface makes IM easier to learn and quicker to operate than its bulkier counterparts, and it has the distinct advantage of being free. Perhaps most significantly, IM is already used for personal communications by a majority of college-aged students, so they are likely to be adept at using it.

### ***Why Should Librarians Care?***

According to recent studies conducted by the Pew Internet and American Life Project and AOL, many college-aged individuals have embraced IM as their preferred method of communication. In its 2005 report on teens and technology, Pew concludes that 42% of online individuals use IM, and that members of Generations X and Y represent the largest segment of the instant messaging group (Pew). A similar study conducted by AOL in 2004 found that 90% of online teens use IM, and that 29% of all users IM more frequently than they email (AOL).<sup>1</sup>

With the enrollment of Internet-dependent Millennial students, returning students who hold full-time jobs, and the rise of distance education, Internet-based library services have become a necessity. While the aforementioned student groups have different needs and skills sets, all demand that the services of their library be available to them remotely and immediately, so that they may more easily fit library research into their busy schedules.

Virtual reference has evolved and changed to include not only email, but also consortium-based chat reference, and now, instant messaging reference. Within the last few years, more and more libraries have begun to implement programs in IM reference, either in support of or as a replacement for their existing chat reference service.<sup>2</sup>

The authors' interest in this study was a result of their research preparation for an IM program at Georgia State University. During their compilation of IM related literature, the authors noticed that librarian perceptions run the gamut. While some have embraced the technology with wholehearted enthusiasm, some show total disinterest, and some display informed dislike.

### ***LITERATURE REVIEW***

The literature specifically related to librarian perception and usage of IM is limited, perhaps due to the newness of the technology in relation to library services. No formal,

large-scale research studies have been conducted regarding librarian experiences with IM. There are a number of case studies and opinion pieces regarding the technology, and there has been a large amount of informal discussion on various library-related weblogs and wikis. The pieces that inspired and provide the most relevant support for this study are opinion pieces by Aaron Schmidt and Michael Stephens (2005), and Sarah Houghton and Aaron Schmidt (2005). Their articles both provide a defense of IM and commentary on the controversy that surrounds it. Schmidt and Stephens include tips for creating staff “buy in,” handling the challenges inherent in the medium, and a defense of IM. They conclude that “Instant messaging isn’t going to replace other forms of communication, but it can make your reference services relevant to a whole new group of users, while serving existing users even better” (35). Houghton and Schmidt also back IM, creating a mock battle between IM and existing chat programs. Their article places IM and chat in a series of head-to-head matches, in which the two compete on many issues, including speed, cost, and features. The article, which concludes IM to be the winner of these matches, has helped to deepen the informal online debate over the role of IM in libraries. Some librarians, including bloggers Caleb Tucker-Raymond and Stephen Francoeur, feel the article implied that librarians must choose one or the other—either traditional chat or IM.<sup>3</sup> They disagree with that implication, arguing that IM and chat can be complements rather than competitors.

While opinions of AIM-style IM have not been formally researched on a broad level, there has been evaluation of opinions at the institution level. The most relevant piece is by Marianne Foley (2002). Foley details the fears held by many librarians regarding

IM, including worries of an unmanageable onslaught of session requests, patron impatience, and log maintenance. Her survey focuses on patron opinions of IM rather than librarian opinions, and concludes that while IM service is a success, it will not act as a replacement to traditional chat. Jody Condit Fagan and Christina Desai also studied librarians' opinions of the difficulties involved in IM communications (2002/2003). They comment that while many librarians initially felt "awkward and slow" at first (123) that they eventually became more comfortable with the program and its limitations (specifically, a lack of eye contact and body language).

While they do not deal specifically with IM, there are also a number of opinion pieces on virtual reference, and chat in general, that help to demonstrate the ongoing debate over the viability of virtual reference services as a whole. Lauer and McKinzie (2002/2003), and Kresh (2002/2003) offer two opposing viewpoints on the topic. Lauer and McKinzie argue that while virtual reference may have some value, librarians show too much "unfettered enthusiasm" regarding its level of usefulness (47). The article includes the authors' personal tales of the disadvantages of virtual reference due to slow transaction time and the lack of face-to-face interaction. Kresh's article stands in opposition to this piece; she argues that virtual reference constitutes "meeting patrons at their point of need" and is a necessary part of today's library services (20). She provides an extensive outline of the history of virtual reference in libraries and offers tips for creating successful virtual services.

There is also a rapidly growing body of literature focused on IM trends outside of libraries. Most of these external publications are related to the business world, but there are also studies that deal with IM in home and school environments, most prominently the Pew Internet and American Life Project detailed in the introduction to this article.

### ***METHODOLOGY***

This survey builds upon the abovementioned publications in the field of IM communications. The researchers sought to gather information on the types of virtual reference services offered by libraries and librarians' attitudes toward IM. Zoomerang, a web-based survey tool, was used to deliver the survey because it allows survey participants to enter responses directly into a database. Responses may then be downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet, ultimately reducing the risk of data corruption. Though this survey tool has features that assist with data tabulation, the researchers used Excel to tabulate responses and identify correlations.

In order to solicit a wide range of responses, the survey was mailed to three of the largest national reference listservs, Lib-Ref, RUSA-1, and RSS-1. Two well known virtual reference related listservs, livereference and DIG-REF, were also chosen. These discussion lists were selected after an extensive search. Each listserv targets individuals who staff or are otherwise involved in reference services. It is understood that data solicitation via open listserv does not necessarily result in a representative sample, but



the authors felt that this broad delivery method would be the most suitable way to reach the largest number of interested parties within a reasonably short period of time.

The survey questions were designed to gather both quantitative and qualitative data through a series of multiple-choice and open-ended questions. The survey consisted of a single line of questioning, beginning with a section of statistical and personal demographic questions, which included inquiries about the participant's place of employment, age, years of experience as a librarian, and role in virtual reference. These questions seek to identify factors that may influence the opinions of the respondent. It then proceeded to a set of virtual-reference-related, multiple-choice and short-answer questions designed to elicit participants' feelings, ideas, and concerns about IM as a reference service. The survey concluded with an opportunity for the survey taker to share any additional opinions. The survey instrument is provided in the appendix.

In order to pinpoint the total number of responding institutions, participants were asked to name their employing university. To identify institutional trends, they were also asked to provide general demographic information about their institutions and insight into the past, present, and immediate future of their virtual reference programs. If a respondent reported having discontinued one or more virtual reference services, he or she was instructed to list the reasons for elimination. Participants currently offering IM were asked how it impacted their virtual reference usage statistics and who was responsible for initiating IM at their institution.

The questions in the survey were carefully constructed to capture the feelings of the respondents. Multiple choice questions frequently provided a free text box for additional responses or comments and the language of each question was scrutinized to limit the chance for misinterpretation. For instance, in asking respondents about their concerns regarding IM, seven responses were provided that reflect concerns frequently mentioned in discussions on this topic. Respondents were also able to list additional concerns in a free text box. To guarantee the survey was focused and easy to complete, the researchers intentionally limited the number of questions. They also examined the flow of the questions to ensure it progressed logically.

A convenience sample of 9 academic librarians tested the 20-question, web-based survey in October 2005. Final modifications to the survey instrument were made based on their input. The survey was available from November 3, 2005, until December 12, 2005 and a follow-up reminder was sent on November 22, 2005 to encourage additional responses.

The survey received 330 responses, but 28 were removed from the data pool because the library type of the respondent fell outside the scope of this study, which focuses on trends in academic libraries only. Excluded results included public libraries, special libraries, government libraries, and K-12 school libraries.

### ***PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS***

The survey received 302 responses from academic librarians. These responses came primarily from librarians who work at two-year colleges and four-year colleges or universities. A small number of the responses came from librarians who work in medical schools, military schools, or career colleges.

In total, 226 academic institutions are represented in the results of this survey, with multiple librarians responding from forty-eight of the institutions. Six respondents did not identify their institution; those six are not included in the institutional results.

Nearly half of the institutions reflected in this survey are large, with populations greater than 15,000 students. The remaining 54% consists of fifty-nine medium-sized schools with 5,000-15,000 students, and sixty-nine small institutions with fewer than 5,000 students.

A majority of respondents (58%) staff a virtual reference service, and 29% are or were involved in the coordination of virtual reference at their institutions. Four percent identify themselves as a library director or department head. Only 9% either did not provide information on their role or are not involved in virtual reference.

A large number of responses (43%) are from individuals who have at least 10 years of experience as a librarian. The remaining responses are fairly evenly divided between librarians with 5-10 years of experience (19%), 2-5 years experience (20%), and librarians with less than 2 years experience (16%). Three percent of the respondents identified themselves as students or paraprofessionals. The second largest respondent

category (11%) is individuals between the ages of 27-36 who have between 2-5 years of experience as a librarian.

Forty-two percent of the respondents are over 45. Only 6% of the respondents are under 27. Thirty percent of respondents are between the ages 27 and 35, and 23% of the respondents are between 36 years old and 45 years old.

Eighty percent of the respondents have experience with IM, and 42% indicate they have used IM to communicate with patrons. Though older respondents are less likely to have experience with IM, a majority (65%) of those over 45 use IM for personal, professional, or patron communication.

## ***RESULTS***

### ***Institutional Trends***

Interest in IM is on the rise in many academic libraries. Twenty-five percent of the libraries represented in the survey offer IM, and an additional 28% are planning to offer or are considering offering IM as a virtual reference option. Respondents from only four institutions (2%) indicated that their staff had discontinued or were thinking of discontinuing IM service. (see Fig. 1)

Based on the results from the survey, there is no correlation between the size of a school and the decision to offer IM reference. Of the 57 responding institutions that offer IM, 24 are large institutions with 15,000 or more students, 11 are medium sized

schools with 5,000-15,000 students and 22 are small schools with 5,000 students. (see Fig. 2)

Thirty-five percent of respondents from institutions that have already implemented IM felt that it slightly increased the number of questions they received through virtual reference. Nineteen percent felt that it led to a significant increase. Only 7% denoted there was no difference in the usage of their virtual reference service, and 39% felt that it was too soon to notice a difference or did not know enough to comment.

The results from the survey suggest that the idea for IM usually develops from an individual librarian who either coordinates or advocates for the development of an IM service. Of the 57 libraries offering IM, 48 of the libraries started their service as the result of the efforts of one librarian. In most cases, the concept emerges from the library staff rather than from the administration. Only five institutions indicated that library administration played a crucial role in initiating the service.

Chat reference is offered at more than half (56%) of the institutions responding to this survey. The growth of chat reference, however, is not as strong as the growth of IM. Though 12% of the institutional respondents are either planning to offer or are considering offering chat as a virtual reference service, another 12% are dissatisfied with commercial chat software and are considering discontinuing or have discontinued a commercial chat service.

Their reasons for discontinuing the service vary. Two institutions replaced IM with a commercial chat program. One school dropped the service due to staffing issues and the other dropped it due to lack of use.<sup>4</sup>

The main reason given for canceling a commercial chat service is lack of satisfaction with the software; the words “clunky” and “complicated” were frequently used in describing it. One respondent indicated that the commercial chat services were “overly complicated for what we needed.” Another stated that the commercial chat services were “not appealing to users.”

Other popular reasons cited for discontinuing a commercial chat product include cost, low usage by patrons, and staffing issues. At two of the libraries that discontinued a chat service, lack of interest/leadership by librarians was indicated as a reason for discontinuation. Dissolution of a virtual reference consortium is another reason given for cancellation.

Six of the libraries that cancelled a commercial product indicated that the library felt IM was a better service. One librarian stated that “chat isn’t used nearly as often as IM.” This sentiment was echoed by several other librarians that favor IM over chat. Another respondent indicated,

*“Most of these packages were designed by info professional for info specialist. Student didn’t like them; librns (sic) didn’t like them; students IM all the time and IM is simple to use.”*

Roughly half of the 27 institutions that have cancelled or are considering canceling a commercial chat service either currently offer IM or are considering offering it. Only one of the institutions discontinuing chat is also considering dropping IM, as well. This seems to imply that some libraries are turning toward IM as an alternative to chat.

Even though live virtual reference is on the rise, the dominant form of virtual reference is still email. Only seventeen institutions in our survey did not offer email.

### ***Librarian Preferences, Perspectives, & Concerns***

Most of the librarians surveyed are in favor of some form of live virtual reference; only 9% dislike both IM and chat. Though chat is more prevalent at the libraries included in this survey, a greater number of librarians indicated they prefer IM (31%) than the number indicating a preference for chat (20%). A large percentage of librarians (24%) have no preference, and 12% feel they do not know enough about each product to comment. (see Fig. 3)

A comparison of responses based on age indicates that younger librarians are more likely to prefer IM as mode of virtual reference than older librarians. The percentage of

respondents who prefer IM decreases as the age categories increase. Only respondents who are over 45 are more likely to prefer chat over IM. (see Fig. 4)

The primary reason librarians favor IM is that they believe it has the potential to draw student interest. Nearly 50% of respondents indicated that they like IM because students are likely to prefer it as a reference tool. One librarian stated, “I personally dislike IM, but it is the preferred online communication for our undergraduate students.” Another explained, “we see it as a tool to draw students who might not take advantage of assistance.” An additional 36% of respondents like IM because it is easier for students to use, and 29% of respondents indicated that they prefer IM because it is less expensive.

Though only 5% feel strongly that IM should not be part of a reference service, librarians harbor many concerns regarding its implementation. (see Fig. 5) In the survey, respondents were given a list of potential problems and were asked to indicate which represented their concerns about IM. The greatest concern is IM’s initial lack of accessibility; forty-seven percent of respondents worry about the need to create an IM account before the patron can submit a question, and 40% are uncomfortable with the fact that some IM providers require users to download IM software before submitting questions. Nearly 40% of the respondents feel that IM is not sufficient for in-depth reference questions. Thirty-five percent of respondents expressed concern that IM does not offer a system for tracking usage statistics. Twenty-three percent are concerned



about viruses or training requirements. Only 10% of those surveyed have no concerns about using IM as a reference tool.

Space was also provided to allow respondents to list any other concerns, and many additional topics were submitted. Several respondents stated that they dislike IM's lack of special features; the option to co-browse and push pages in commercial chat software is viewed as a distinct advantage over IM. As one librarian comments, "I prefer chat reference because of its ability to demonstrate effective searching techniques. Being able to guide a user through a database is very helpful." Other concerns include the inability to identify users, potential abuse from "pranksters," higher demand for immediate response, and "disappearing" patrons. The frustration caused by that final point is illustrated by an example provided by a respondent.

"Patrons disappear in the middle of an IM to do other things. They are used to chatting informally with friends and doing other activities at the same time. When they talk to us they are often rather cavalier in their approach to asking questions. That happened just yesterday. The person left for 15 minutes in the middle of my session with him. It eats up a lot of time to try to negotiate a question that could be handled more quickly if the patron would just call."

Some of the issues raised in the comments section are problems related to virtual reference in general. Many librarians are concerned about the efficiency and value of providing IM *or* chat reference. The lack of questions during slow periods leads some

librarians to feel these services are a waste of time. “I don’t mind it when we actually have questions,” stated one respondent, “but I don’t like being tied to my desk when questions are few and far between.” Another more impassionate respondent contends, “the type of questions answered are at the lowest level and make my colleagues act more like greeters than knowledge experts. We’re dumbing down our work to the lowest common denominator.”

Another general concern about IM and chat is the ability to be available when the service is most needed. Many agree with the statement, “I believe that real-time virtual reference is only useful if you can offer long hours of service and late-night hours (when students are doing their work).” Finding the right staffing model to offer a sufficient level of service is a key consideration for smaller libraries. Despite interest in IM, some libraries choose a commercial chat software product because chat provides the option of consortia staffing.

## ***DISCUSSION***

Based on the issues and concerns raised about IM and chat, it is clear that both are still struggling to win full acceptance as vital reference services. Negative experiences with commercial chat products, concerns about staffing and hours, and difficulty adjusting to the communication style of chat and IM users all prompt librarians to question the value of the services. Even so, most librarians recognize that current and emerging

generations of students are more likely to communicate through these synchronous communication tools, and are beginning to include them as reference contact options.

Though more libraries offer chat, IM appears to be gaining strength as a reference service. Some view it as a less expensive replacement tool for commercial chat services. Most, however, view it as a new avenue for reaching out to students. In spite of some dislike and many concerns toward IM reference, the results of this survey suggest that the number of libraries offering it will continue to grow. IM is currently offered at 25% of the institutions in this study and is being considered by another 28%. The sizes of institutions offering IM vary, which suggests that IM is a tool that fits all academic libraries.

The increasing number of librarians who are comfortable with this form of communication is further evidence for its potential growth. Many librarians already use IM for personal or professional reasons. In this survey, 80% of the respondents have used IM. Though there is a correlation between a librarian's age and their preference for IM, younger librarians are not the only ones adopting IM as a mode of communication. Sixty-five percent of survey respondents over the age of 45 have used IM in the past. Given librarians' overall willingness to dabble in IM, it seems fair to conclude that the platform is gaining acceptance.

***Dealing With Concerns:***

Some of the concerns that were raised by respondents are no longer prohibitive, for example, logging IM transcripts and statistics, patron accessibility issues, and security. Both of the main IM aggregator services, Trillian and Gaim, allow the user to maintain transcripts of all sessions and have all sessions sent to and saved on one master PC. While it does represent a little more work than the auto-logging provided by the consortial chat programs, those logs could be made available to IM staffers via an intranet or other private webpage, with or without identifying information. Many people are also concerned over the now defunct requirement that users download an IM client before they can access their accounts. New developments with AIM, MSN, and Yahoo! allow users of all three to log-in via the Internet. Meebo, an innovative, web-based aggregator, has also been recently released; IM staffers and patrons can utilize the service to access their accounts without a download.

Security concerns about IM may also be inflated. Many people who would like to begin an IM program have been rebuffed by their information technology departments, who claim that IM will unacceptably compromise security. Though there have been problems a number of solutions are available, and infection is fairly easy to avoid (DelVecchio). Links received through instant message sessions are the most common method of viral transmission, and IM staffers can easily be trained to steer clear of suspicious links.

Other issues raised about IM are more difficult to solve and will require librarians to develop creative solutions. There are presently no quick cures for a lack of staffing, the

most frequently cited problem. Hopefully, as more and more libraries become involved with IM, the more reason there will be to create consortia agreements that can help smaller libraries to become involved.

Another persistent problem is the fact that all users must have an existing account in order to log in. Fortunately, many students already have IM accounts, so a large audience will still be reached by the service.

A few respondents also expressed concern over the potential for abuse of the service. While there is little that can be done to prevent patron misuse of IM or chat, pilot studies show that abuse occurs fairly infrequently (Radford).

Another issue stems from the complaint that IM is not sufficient for the complexities of the reference interview; for many, nothing can match the ability to work face-to-face with a patron. To address this issue, librarians must recognize that this limitation is inherent in all online media communication systems and learn to work around it. An excellent way to defuse this issue is to view IM as an initial point of contact for more complex questions rather than the end point. Under this model, librarians can feel comfortable suggesting telephone or in-person conversations when a question is too in-depth for IM.

## *CONCLUSION*

This study confirms that IM is growing in academic libraries in spite of the concerns that surround it. Though staffing and technical issues cause apprehension and some discontentment, librarians are open to testing the platform and recognize its value. Advocates hope that IM will broaden the base of library users by reaching students who already utilize it for personal communications. This potential for contact overrides many concerns about IM and provides ample fuel for its growth. As librarians grow more comfortable with this form of communication and develop a better understanding of student expectations, support for the service should continue to grow.

IM is a relatively new offering in most libraries, so its impact is still difficult to determine. Additional studies tracking usage statistics and user demographics will help establish the true impact of IM on reference services. Further research is also needed to develop efficient staffing models and consortia agreements. These types of studies, in conjunction with greater understanding of IM capabilities, technical options, and communication styles, will help libraries become more confident in developing IM reference services.

## *NOTES*

1. Analysis of teens' IM usage from a library perspective is also available; for a

thorough investigation of the history and advantages of IM, read Meredith Phillips' 2004 Master's Thesis, "The Advantages and Disadvantages of AOL Instant Messenger as a Chat Reference System." Available at:  
<<http://etd.ils.unc.edu/dspace/retrieve/361/meredithphillips.pdf>>.

2. A list of libraries currently offering IM reference is available at the Library Success Wiki.

<[http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Online\\_Reference#Libraries\\_Using\\_IM\\_Reference](http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Online_Reference#Libraries_Using_IM_Reference)>.

3. Caleb Tucker-Raymond and Stephen Francoeur are contributors to the weblogs L-Net Staff Information and Digital Reference, respectively. Related posts available at: <<http://www.oregonlibraries.net/staff/?p=178>> and <<http://www.teachinglibrarian.org/weblog/2005/06/web-based-chat-and-im-not-either-or-but.html>>

4. Since this survey was conducted, the authors have learned that one of the libraries that discontinued IM in favor of commercial chat is now switching back to IM.

### ***REFERENCES***

AOL. 2004. *America Online Inc.'s Second Annual Instant Messaging Trends Survey*

*Shows Instant Messaging Has Gone Mainstream.* Available at:

<[http://media.aoltimewarner.com/media/newmedia/cb\\_press\\_view.cfm?release\\_num=55254160](http://media.aoltimewarner.com/media/newmedia/cb_press_view.cfm?release_num=55254160)>.

DelVecchio, Steve. 2005. *Chatting with Confidence: Instant Messaging Security.*

*WebJunction*. Available at:

<<http://www.webjunction.org/do/DisplayContent?id=11993>>.

Fagan, Jody Condit and Desai, Christina M. 2002/2003. Communication Strategies for Instant Messaging and Chat Reference Services. *Reference Librarian* 79/80: 121-155.

Foley, Marianne. 2002. Instant messaging reference in an academic library: a case study. *College & Research Libraries* 63(1): 36-45.

Houghton, Sarah and Schmidt, Aaron. 2005. Web-based chat vs. instant messaging. *Online* 29(4): 26-30.

Kresh, Diane. 2002/2003. Virtually yours: thoughts on where we have been and where we are going with virtual reference services in libraries. *The Reference Librarian* 79/80: 19-34.

Lauer, Jonathan D. 2002/2003. Bad moon rising: a candid examination of digital reference and what it means to the profession. *The Reference Librarian* 79/80: 45-56.

Pew Internet and American Life Project. 2005. *Teens and Technology*. Available at: <[http://www.pewinternet.org/report\\_display.asp?r=162](http://www.pewinternet.org/report_display.asp?r=162)>.

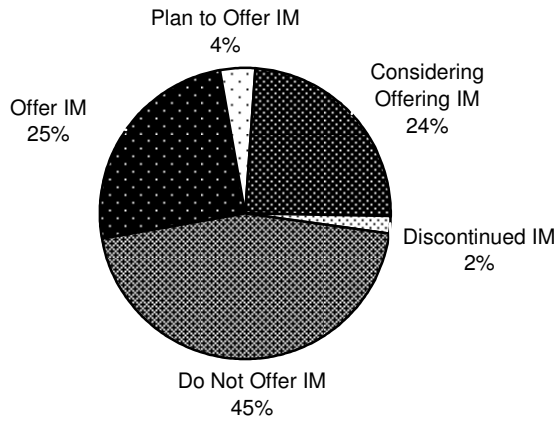
Radford, Marie. (In Press). Encountering virtual users: a qualitative investigation of interpersonal communication in chat reference. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*.

Schmidt, Aaron, and Stephens, Michael. 2005. IM me. *Library Journal* 130(6): 34-35.

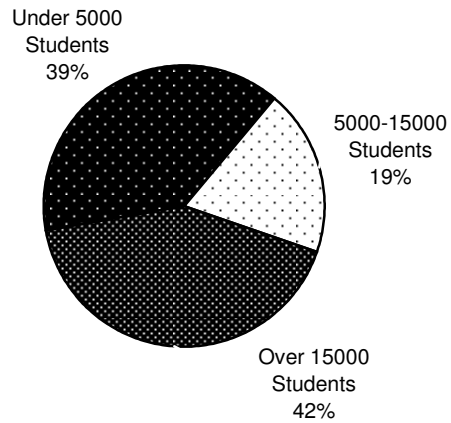


## FIGURES

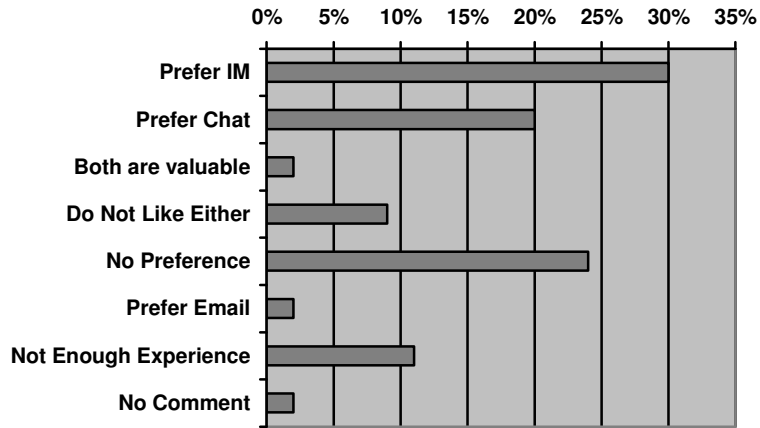
**Figure 1: Prevalence of IM in Libraries**



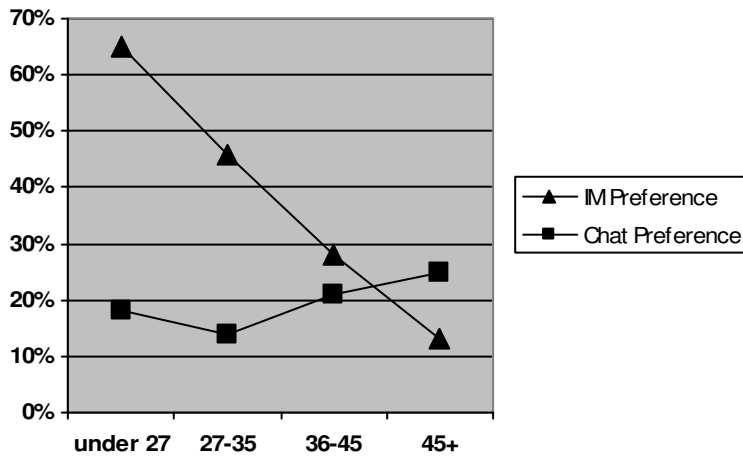
**Figure 2: Size of Institutions Offering IM**



**Figure 3: Preference of IM or Chat**



**Figure 4: IM & Chat Preference by Age**



**Figure 5: Problems Librarians Associate with IM**

Concerns Listed in the Survey					
Logistical Concerns		Librarian Concerns		Patron Related Concerns	
Does not track usage statistics	35%	Insufficient for in-depth questions	39%	Must create or have an IM account	47%
Vulnerability to computer viruses	23%			Software download required	40%
Requires training for librarians & staff	23%				

Concerns Listed by Respondents in Free Text Box		
Logistical Concerns	Librarian Concerns	Patron Related Concerns
Does not provide transcripts or session archive	Questions are directional not reference oriented	Privacy of sessions
Unable to staff via consortia	Pressure for fast answers	Patron must add library to buddy list
Lacks special features (co-browse, page pushing)	Inadequate typing skills	Not enough patrons are interested in this type of system
Librarians & staff must create IM ids that make sense to users	Time consuming method for responding to patrons (easier to use phone or face to face)	
Difficult to provide coverage for all IM systems	Unable to identify type of patron and weed out non-affiliated patrons	
IM updates frequently & exposes users to advertising	Difficult to respond to multiple patrons	
Time wasted by spambots, & chatterbots	Time wasted by sessions initiated by pranksters or individuals who just want to chat	
Must install IM on library computers	Patrons leave during session to do other things	
Problems associated with multiple users using one IM account (i.e., switching shifts)	IM is a fad that will be replaced by a another medium	

## Appendix: Survey Instrument

- 1.) In order to help us accurately assess the number of responding institutions, please provide the name of your institution.
- 2.) Which of the following best describes your institution?
  - a. Community College or Two-Year College
  - b. Four Year College (all undergraduate programs)
  - c. Master's level College or University (includes graduate programs)
  - d. Research University or College (includes doctoral programs)
  - e. Other
- 3.) What is the size of your student body?
  - a. 5,000 or fewer
  - b. 5,000-15,000
  - c. 15,000 or more
- 4.) How long have you been employed as a Librarian?
  - a. 0-2 years
  - b. 2-5 years
  - c. 5-10 years
  - d. 10 years +
  - e. I am a student
  - f. I am a paraprofessional
- 5.) What is your age?
  - a. Under 27 years old
  - b. 27- 35 years old
  - c. 36 - 45 years old
  - d. 45 years +
- 6.) Which of the following describes your experience with Instant Messaging? (Please check all that apply)
  - O. I use IM for personal communications
  - O. I use IM to communicate with colleagues
  - O. I currently use or have used chat to communicate with library patrons
  - O. I have no experience with IM
- 7.) Which of the following virtual reference services does your library currently offer (please check all that apply):
  - O. Email reference
  - O. Chat reference using a commercial software package (for example, 24/7, QuestionPoint)
  - O. Chat reference using a system designed in-house
  - O. IM reference
  - O. We do not offer any virtual reference services

O. Other (please explain)

8.) Which of the following reference services is your library considering offering?

(Please check all that apply)

- O. We are planning to offer chat reference.
- O. We are considering offering chat reference.
- O. We are planning to offer IM reference.
- O. We are considering offering IM reference.
- O. Other (please explain)
- O. No additional services are being considered/planned at this time.

9.) Who originated the idea for IM at your institution if it is or will be implemented?

- a. Our library administration/head felt that it should be implemented.
- b. Many individuals in the library were interested in offering this service.
- c. An individual librarian or small group of librarians advocated for implementing this service.
- d. Students suggested that the library offer IM reference service.
- e. Other (please explain)

10.) Has your library discontinued or planned to discontinue any of the following services (Please check all that apply)

- O. Email reference
- O. Chat reference using a commercial software package
- O. Chat reference using a system designed in-house
- O. IM reference
- O. We have not discontinued or planned to discontinue any virtual reference services.

11.) If you have discontinued any virtual reference services, please explain the reasons for that decision.

12.) What is your role in virtual reference at your library?

- a. Virtual reference coordinator
- b. Staff virtual reference services
- c. Other (please explain)

13.) In general, which of the following virtual reference services do you think students prefer?

- a. Chat reference
- b. IM reference
- c. Students have no preference
- d. Students do not like either service
- d. Not sure

14.) Besides students, what other type of patrons do you think would be interested in using IM reference? (Please check all that apply)

- O. Faculty
- O. Staff
- O. Non-Affiliated or Community Member patrons
- O. Alumni
- O. Interest from non-student groups would probably be limited
- O. No other groups would be interested.

15.) Which of the following virtual reference services do **you** prefer?

- a. Chat reference
- b. IM reference
- c. I don't like either service
- d. I have no preference

16.) Which of the following statements best reflects your feelings toward IM reference? (Please check all that apply)

- O. I like IM reference because it is less expensive than chat reference.
- O. I like IM because it is the tool that students are more likely to use.
- O. I like IM because it is easier for the students to use.
- O. I think IM should be offered in conjunction with chat reference services.
- O. I do not like IM, but I think it may be useful as a reference service.
- O. I do not think IM should be part of library reference services. (Please elaborate)

17.) If you selected the final option in the previous question, please comment on the reasons for your response.

18.) What are your concerns regarding IM reference? (Please check all that apply)

- O. I have no concerns about IM reference
- O. IM reference may allow viruses to infect the library computer network
- O. IM does not offer a system for tracking usage statistics
- O. Librarians will need to be trained how to use IM reference
- O. It is difficult to use IM for in-depth reference questions.
- O. Some IM software required patrons to download IM software before they are able to submit questions
- O. The patron must create an IM account before s/he can submit questions.
- O. Other (please explain)

19.) If your library has implemented IM, which best describes your usage results:

- a. IM has significantly increased the number of patrons using virtual reference significantly.
- b. IM has contributed to a slight increase the number of patrons using virtual reference.
- c. IM has contributed to a decrease in the number of patrons using virtual reference.

- d. We have not noticed any difference in the number of patrons using virtual reference.
- e. It is too soon to tell.
- f. Other (please explain)

20.) If you have any other thoughts or comments on Instant Messaging Reference or on any of your previous responses, please share them here.