Reinforcing The Status Quo in Organizations Through Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM)

# Abstract

This research explores the effect of Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) usage on power relations in organizations. Twenty-one interview sessions were conducted with different levels of employees from the procurement department in a utility organization in Malaysia. Three cases were identified from the interview sessions: work instruction, decision making, and work monitoring. The findings suggest that the implementation of MIM in managing work reinforces the status quo of top management through congregation of employees, force commitment, and the illusion of consensus.

# Introduction

The usage of MIM applications, such as WhatsApp and Telegram, as a way to communicate has become popular among many smartphone users (Church & Oliveira, 2013). MIM is a mobile app that provides real-time communications services (Wu, Lu, Gong, & Gupta, 2017). It has also attracted many users due to its simple and fun tools for communicating with family, friends, and others. It provides users with several attractive features, such as free SMS (Duggan, 2015), photo, videos, locations, and document sharing (Oghuma, Libaque-Saenz, Wong, & Chang, 2016), as well as free voice and video calling for multiple users simultaneously (WhatsApp, 2018). Malaysia has demonstrated the second highest use of WhatsApp with a reported population share of 68% (Statista, 2018).

MIM technology actually started with short messaging services (SMS) which allow users to exchange short text messages of up to 160 characters and images with other mobile handset users (Chruch & Oliveira, 2013). In the middle of the 1990s, Instant Messaging (IM) applications such as Yahoo and Facebook Messenger were introduced to the public. IM allows users to share more types of documents, such as text, pictures, voice, and graphics. However, IM is still a limited technology because it is based on a dyadic “call” model. Users do not go into “rooms” to converse with whomever is there; instead there is a single individual with whom they communicate (Nardi, Whittaker, Bradner, 2000). Fortunately, in the late 2000s, the WhatsApp application started the first MIM by allowing users to share text, picture, video, and audio for free. Users can use the application through smartphones or desktops. Some of the most popular MIM applications are WhatsApp, Telegram, LINE, and WeChat.

MIM applications have also been used extensively in organizations. MIM has been used to connect organizations with internal (Garrett & Danziger, 2007) and external parties (Deng, Lu, Wei, & Zhang, 2010). It has also been used as a channel for sharing and transferring documents, such as meeting invitations, approval documents, and request letters (So, 2016). Some even employ this application as a medium to conduct meetings and arrive at enforceable decisions. While this development is plausible, there are possible disadvantages that business and organizations may have overlooked. In South Korea, some employees have complained that MIM usage has infringed on employees’ personal time outside office hours (Guardian, 2016). This practice is more pervasive in Malaysia where it led to one trade union proposing that the government develop legislation to ban such practices (World of Buzz, 2018). One study even suggested that interruption from MIM applications affects individual and group quality performance (Gupta, Li, & Sharda, 2013).

While anecdotal evidence suggests that there are inherent drawbacks in using MIM for managing work, studies on such possibilities are scarce. Instead the, state-of-the-art research on MIM in the workplace is more focused on the benefits of the application. For example, an online survey of 470 respondents showed that the usage of MIM in supporting relationships with customers can contribute to customer care and support the customer journey (Marino & Lo Presti, 2019). Another study by Vivian and Ronald (2015) of 245 Hong Kong real estate agents suggested that employee MIM use and affordances were positively associated with job performance and satisfaction.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a laissez-faire attitude among MIM researchers on the potential drawbacks of the technology when used for managing work. There is a strong suspicion that organizations underestimate the impact of simple technologies such as MIM. For example, there is a scarcity of studies on the impact of simple communication technologies such as MIM on power relations, compared to studies involving enterprise systems. Such a study by Esendemirli, Turker, & Altuntas (2015) on Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) found that some components of interdepartmental relations only emerged as significant factors in departmental performance when ERP was used effectively within the department. As a result, some organizations were caught by surprise when they saw the adverse effect of MIM on power relations in organizations (Shim & Shin, 2016). Therefore, more studies on the relation between MIM and power relations in organizations is needed to determine how the former can affect the latter.

# Literature Review

## Mobile Instant Messaging

Because IM is the predecessor of MIM, the review of the relevant literature would be incomplete without coverage of both IM and MIM studies. Furthermore, numerous studies have already been conducted on the usage of IM, in particular its usage for managing work. Pazos et al. (2013), for example, studied how IM functions to support tools in an organization. In another study, Ou and Davison (2010) investigated the impact of IM usage in the workplace.

Studies on MIM can be divided into two streams: societal and organizational. Earlier studies on MIM at the societal level focus on how the technology is utilized by users. For example, research by Wolf (2000) suggests an increase in emoticon use when using instant messaging to display emotions to others. Meanwhile, recent research on MIM has focused on the implication of MIM usage among members of society. For example, Wu et al. (2017) conducted a study on the antecedents of active usage of MIM. The findings suggest that MIM features and emotional attachment influence the usage of MIM.

Earlier studies at the organizational level focused more on the technology use in the organization. For example, research on an MIM application called Hubbub suggests that the technology removes barriers between different levels in the organization, hence increasing the communication among professional staff (Isaacs, Walendowski, & Ranganathan, 2002). Meanwhile, recent studies have focused on the impact on the organization and its members. One study suggests that IM has no significant effect on employee job satisfaction, work performance, or organizational commitment (Wu, Liang, Chiu, & Yuan, 2017). Unfortunately, such studies are scarce. Moreover, there is still a lack of awareness of the potential impact of MIM on an organization’s power relations.

## Power in Organization

Studies on power in organizations can be divided into three categories: sources of power, the power process, and power outcomes. There are three sources of power: authority (Cendon & Jarvenpaa, 2001), resources (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977), and network (Cendon & Jarvenpaa, 2001; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977). On the other hand, the power process refers to events and activities that change the power relations in an organization. The changes come from a few factors, such as organizational culture (Jones, Jimmieson & Griffiths, 2005), organizational leadership (Hwang, Al-Arabiat, Rouibah, and Chung, 2016), knowledge (Pozzebon and Pinsonneault, 2012), technology (Markus, 2004), power level (Hyde, 2018), and networking (Olesen and Myers, 1999). Finally, power outcomes refer to the effects of changes in power relations. The outcomes include power shift (Clegg, 1989) and power struggle (Van Bunderen, Greer, and Van Knippenberg, 2018). Table 1 provides an explanation of the three categories of studies on power in organizations.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Component | Constructs | Explanation | References |
| Sources of Power | Hierarchical Authority | Refers to official positions, hierarchical level, and span of control as the core or support unit of the organization | Cendon & Jarvenpaa (2001) |
|  | Control Resources | Resources available in organizational environments, such as grants | Salancik & Pfeffer (1977) |
|  | Network Centrality | An interconnecting workflow that differentiates each position and power through resource exchange. This also refers to the dependencies of people in the organization | Cendon & Jarvenpaa (2001); Salancik & Pfeffer (1977) |
| Power Process | Organizational Culture | The culture of human relations in the organization influences employee readiness for change in the context of information system implementation. Human relations, which can be developed through training and development programs, can build employee confidence and capability to overcome workplace challenges | Jones, Jimmieson, & Griffiths (2005). |
|  | Organizational Leadership | High quality relationships between leader and employees increases employee commitment and job satisfaction in the change process. | Hwang, Al-Arabiat, Rouibah, and Chung (2016) |
|  | Knowledge | Power and knowledge are intertwined and provide evidence of mutual influence of the client and consultant relationship in the new IS implementation. The increasing knowledge of the clients encourages their desire and efforts to increase their control over the project and contributes to political battles and power struggles with consultants. | Pozzebon and Pinsonneault (2012) |
|  | Networking | A relationship or network exists between practitioners and the researcher in implementing a new IS technology. In this situation, the researcher provides practitioners with the organizational culture and norms, while practitioners assist the researcher in providing an effective IS. | Olesen and Myers (1999) |
|  | Power Level | Low power actors have an ability to successfully play a role as change agents in the organization. Low power actors in the organization lead the group by emphasizing collaboration and learning in order to promote multicultural organizational development (MCOD) efforts. | Hyde (2018) |
|  | Technology | A study on technochange (technology change and organizational change) found that it is not easy to significantly improve organizational functioning and performance with or without technology. Effective design skills and implementation process help in reducing failure risks. Successful technochange requires complementary technology, alignment between technology solutions and organization processes, culture and incentives, and benefit arrangements. | Markus (2004) |
| Power Outcome | Power Shift | A study on the “circuit of power” found that environment innovation often results in resistance or power shift in the organization. | Clegg (1989) |
|  | Power Struggle | Different power structures in teams cause members to be differently impacted by the resource-threatening inter-team conflicts which contribute to power struggles. This power struggle, in the end, is presumed to negatively affect team performance. | Van Bunderen, Greer, and Van Knippenberg (2018) |

Table 1: The summary of Studies on Power in Organizations

# Research Methodology

## Research Design

This study will adopt explorative and interpretive case study research methodologies which could lead to new findings that are not prejudiced by a priori hypotheses (Hale, Dulek, & Hale, 2005). Case study research methods help researchers to understand how and why a particular business situation exits. Moreover, using empirical evidence from “real people in real organizations is an original contribution to the knowledge” (Myers, 2009). For the purpose of this study, a single case study method at a relevant organization was implemented. An organization that uses MIM for managing work, such as in decision making, work instruction, and work monitoring, was chosen as the research site. In addition, the organization provided access to all levels of the organization including management, officers, and general staff.

## Data Collection

This study was conducted at the procurement department of a utility company in Malaysia. The department contains 127 employees, comprising one general manager, three senior managers, seven managers, 44 executives, and 72 non-executive staff. In this study, the general manager, senior manager, and manager will be grouped together as management. For this study, we interviewed 21 respondents through six group interview sessions lasting between 40-60 minutes. The respondents were selected by the management based on the study requirements. The interview participants were selected from different levels of the organization’s hierarchy that use MIM actively in managing work. Table 2 shows the number of respondents and their roles in the department.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Position | | Unit | Total |
| Management: | General manager | - | 1 |
|  | Senior managers | Tender,  Procurement operation,  Shared service management | 3 |
|  | Managers | Tender,  Procurement operation,  Shared service management | 3 |
| Officer: | Executive | Procurement operation,  Shared service management | 7 |
| General staff: | Non-executive | Tender,  Shared service management | 7 |
| **Total** | | | **21** |

Table 2: Number and roles of participants in PSS Department

To provide flexibility and convenience to the respondents, the interviews were conducted at their workplace. The interviews began with broad questions and progressed to more specific questions on the employee’s usage of MIM in managing work. The questions revolved around the three components of power relations in an organization: sources of power, changes of power, and power outcomes. Table 3 shows the elements of power relations components.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Components | Description |
| Sources of Power | Hierarchical authority, control resources, network centrality |
| Power Process | Culture, leadership, network, knowledge, level of power, stakeholder intention, technology |
| Power Outcome | Power shift, power struggle, resistance, conflict, job performance, job satisfaction |

Table 3: The components of interview questions

## Data Analysis

The data analysis process consists of four activities. The first activity involves identifying symptoms of changes in power relations due to the use of MIM for work management. Next, the identified symptoms are illustrated through scenarios. In this study, three scenarios are identified and described: work instruction, work monitoring, and decision making. The third activity involves discussing the scenarios in relation to the state-of-the-art knowledge on power relations. The last activity in the data analysis process involves developing an extended model of MIM usage in managing work for this particular case. Figure 1 shows the data analysis process.

Figure : Data Analysis Process

Identify symptoms

Discuss the scenarios

Developing extended model

Demonstrate the symptoms through scenarios

# Analysis and Findings

## Organizational Background

The organization in this study is a utility company in Malaysia. Its core business involves the generation, grid, and distribution of utilities. The company started its operation in 1949 by providing utility services to commercial, residential, and industrial areas. Currently, the company has 9.2 million customers in Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah, and Labuan. It also has more than 100 kiosks in Malaysia providing services such as payment of bills, utility application, enquiries on billing, advisory services fixtures, wiring and safety, and advice on effective and safe use of utilities.

The study was conducted at the procurement department of this company. It was established as a new department in 2016 to manage the company’s procurement activities. The activities include managing purchase orders, online purchases, invoicing, contract administration, master data administration, tender administration, and vendor services. This department comprises three units: Contract Management, Procurement Operation, and Shared Service Management.

MIM usage in the organization started sometime in 2016. The technology usage was initiated by the top management in the department for information sharing and immediate action. The main MIM app used throughout the company is WhatsApp. Several WhatsApp groups such as a PSS department group, a unit group, a team group, and other informal groups among colleagues were formed. Involvement in the WhatsApp group depends on a person’s position, unit, and teams of the staff. As mentioned by one manager:

*“[...] the senior manager will join all the WhatsApp manager groups, a manager will join the lower level group[...]”*

The usage of WhatsApp in the department in managing work is extensive. The MIM app is used for sharing information on new policies or procedures among colleagues, updating task progress to managers, giving work instructions to general staff, sharing work issues with managers and colleagues, and conducting discussions among colleagues. The app is even used for approval of urgent tasks and decision making. According to the manager:

*“[...]we use WhatsApp for work [...] like decision making in WhatsApp, [...] if there is an urgent task, we do a meeting in WhatsApp first, the documentation comes later[...]”*

## Data Analysis

### Case 1: Work Instruction

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Position | Before MIM Implementation | After MIM Implementation |
| Management | Assign task to the appropriate unit through email  Assign task to the appropriate team and staff  Complete the task | Assign task to the appropriate staff through WhatsApp  Complete the task |
| Officers |  |  |
| General staffs |  |  |

Figure 2: The work instruction process

Figure 2 shows the work instruction process in the department. There is very little difference between the steps before the use of MIM and after. Before the use of MIM, the process consisted of three steps. First, management assigns a task to an appropriate officer through email. Next, the respective officer delegates the task to the appropriate team and staff, and the process ends with the general staff completing the task. The task of the officer is to monitor the implementation of the task to completion and to update management on its progress. In other words, management relies on the officer to provide the latest update on the task that he/she has assigned. However, with the introduction of MIM, management became less reliant on officers for the delivery of instructions and progress updates. Now, management can directly disseminate their instructions through the technology. Moreover, management can limit the scope of the message to only those who are relevant for the task. In other words, the message can be delivered directly to a particular staff person on a particular team. According to a manager:

*“[...]for example, if we have system error [...] I will screen shot the error and share in the WhatsApp group for a solution […]”*

*“[..]for example, if I requested certain data through a WhatsApp group [...] the communication is faster compared to email [...]”*

### Case 2: Decision Making

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Position | Before MIM Implementation | After MIM Implementation |
| Management | Identify the issues  Set meeting and email invitation  Discuss the issues and arrive at a decision  Make final decision  Share the decision with team | Identify the issues  Discuss the issues in appropriate WhatsApp group  Make final decision through WhatsApp |
| Officers |  |  |
| General staff |  |  |

Figure 4: The decision making process

Figure 4 shows the decision making process in the department before and after the introduction of MIM. Before the introduction of MIM, the process starts with management identifying the issues for discussion and proceeding with organizing a meeting and inviting the relevant staff. Next, the respective management and officer discuss the issues and arrive at a decision. Lastly, the decision is shared with the team through a face-to-face meeting or email. On the other hand, the use of MIM for decision making enables the process to also include the general staff. Once an issue has been identified by management, all the respective officers and staff members are involved in a group discussion over the MIM technology. Additionally, the technology allows asynchronous communication, which means that employees can be involved in different discussions at any one time. Eventually, the respective management will finalize the decision and share it through the MIM group. As one officer said:

*“[…] the manager shares one issue, [...] we will have a sharing session in the WhatsApp group[...]”*

*“[...] during the brainstorming session, [...] the Senior manager [..]makes a final decision”*

### Case 3: Work Monitoring

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Position | Before MIM Implementation | After MIM Implementation |
| Management | Acquire progress from respective officers  Check the progress with relevant team  Update the task progress  Receive the task progress  Update the task progress |  |
| Officers |  | Acquire progress from appropriate WhatsApp group  Update the task progress in appropriate WhatsApp group  Receive the task progress |
| General staffs |  |  |

Figure 5: The work monitoring process

Figure 5 shows the work monitoring process in the department before and after the introduction of MIM. The work monitoring process before the introduction of MIM involved five stages. It started with management acquiring the task progress from the respective officer through email. The process continued with the officer asking for an update on the task with the relevant teams. The respective general staff members compiled the necessary information and updated the particular officers regarding progress. In turn, the officers then updated management. The use of MIM technology, however, reduced the steps to three. The reduction occurred because management did not have to go through the officers to receive the progress updates. Instead, management could acquire the task progress by sending a message directly to the appropriate WhatsApp group. Instead of the officers, the respective general staff members could directly update their progress in the WhatsApp group. As one of the managers mentioned:

*“[...] I forward the information on the vendor to the Vendor Registration WhatsApp group [...] I ask the respective staff members to update the status of this vendor registration[...] They immediately update the status in WhatsApp group[…]”*

*“[...] if I don’t response or were aware of the WhatsApp message, my team will reply and update the status...the team will response on the behalf of you [...]”*

# Discussion

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Power sources | Hierarchical authority |
| Power process | Power level |
| Power outcome | Reinforcing authority |

*Table 5: Findings of power relatiosn*

The power to introduce MIM into the organization came from the hierarchical authority (Bloom et al., 2014), i.e., it was introduced by the management of the firm. The explicit demarcation of duties remains despite the introduction of MIM into the workplace (Hyde, 2018; Shu and Lewin, 2018). The power in the organization is still dominated by management, who make all the decisions. The technology only replaces the medium in which the discussions of the decisions take place. Meanwhile, the officers still have the responsibility of monitoring progress and ensuring the completion of tasks in the organization, and the general staff is still expected to personally implement the tasks. Despite being able to now join the discussion of a decision and provide updates directly to management, staff roles are still limited by where they are in the organization’s hierarchy.

As a result, the anticipated power shift (Held, 2000) never takes place. Instead, management is able to strengthen its hold over the lower level employees. Management is now able to use MIM to bypass officers and issue instructions and monitor the progress of tasks. Unfortunately, officers receive a bad deal from the use of MIM in managing work. Their significance in the department is lessened to a great extent due to the extended reach of management. The same can be said of the general staff. Due to the technology’s ability to directly connect different levels of the organization, they are being monitored directly at once by both management and officers.

### Extended Model

Illusion of Consensus

Congregation of Employees

Reinforcing the Status Quo

Force Commitment

*Figure 6: Extended model of MIM and power relations*

The findings suggest that there the use of MIM basically results in no changes in power relations. Instead, the introduction of MIM into the workplace has strengthened the domination of management over the rest of the employees. The technology makes the demarcation between the three levels in the organization more explicit. The instructions and directions come from the top while the officers and general staff are only expected to implement them.

Figure 6 shows an extended model of MIM usage in reinforcing the status quo, i.e., maintaining the power the top management has over the rest of the organization. The reinforcement of the status quo starts with the ability of the MIM technology to gather all levels of employees in one platform. The virtual congregation of all employees enables them to chat and share messages, photos, and videos (WhatsApp, 2018). Furthermore, the technology has a feature that allows users to see whether other employees are present in the virtual groups and whether they have read the messages that have been sent there. This “opportunistic interaction” (Isaacs, Walendowski, and Ranganathan, 2002) forces users to receive the messages. Users can no longer deny that they have received a particular message, especially from management.

Indirectly, the technology “forces” the employees to commit to a particular decision. In addition to sharing messages among members, the technology is also able to display details, such as when the message was delivered and whether it has been read or played by each member (Church & Oliveira, 2013). While the original intention of this function was noble, i.e., to alert users to quickly respond to a message (Nardi et. al, 2000), it has instead become a mechanism for management to indirectly solicit commitments from group members (Pielot & Church et al., 2014). This happens because the technology tends more towards giving and receiving messages than providing an avenue for extensive discussion on work issues. Eventually, the officers and general staff give up any chance for a discussion and simply accept management’s decisions and directions.

Consequently, the technology also gives an illusion of consensus, especially to management. Unable to effectively express their opinions for fear of looking foolish in the MIM group, the officers and general staff suppress their concerns. They also feel that their personal opinions are not as convincing as management’s (Marks & Miller, 1987). Furthermore, the features, such as “last-seen” in WhatsApp, also “pressure” members to give a quick response (Nardi et. al., 2000). Because they lack the time to think and give constructive feedback, most resort to simply agreeing to an issue.

# Conclusion

MIM usage, such as WhatsApp, in organization has the potential to change power relations. Its usage today is not limited to communication, as it is also as a platform for managing work tasks, such as disseminating instructions, monitoring work, and making decisions. This study explores the effect of MIM usage on power in organizations. The data from this study shows that the usage of MIM in managing work reinforces the status quo in the organization. MIM usage in the organization allows management to reach different levels of employees at any point of time. It allows instructions or decisions to be shared with all of members of the organization. Indirectly, it reinforces the power of management within the organization.

This study offers several key theoretical contributions. First of all, it adds to the knowledge on IS and power relations in organizations. Prior knowledge on power and IS technology was based mainly on the enterprise system, while this study examines the communication system in an organization. Secondly, this research adds to the knowledge on MIM and power relations when it is used for managing work. Thirdly, this research will enhance understanding of how simple mobile applications, such as mobile instant messaging, can have a great impact on the status quo. Moreover, this study provides practical contributions. It helps enhance management’s ability to determine the most effective use of MIM in the organization and aids in designing policies on MIM usage.

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