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

# Abstract

This research explores the effect of Mobile Instant Messaging (MIM) usage on power relation in organization. 21 interviews session were conducted with the different level of employees from procurement department in one of utility organization in Malaysia. Three cases were identified from the interview session: work instruction, decision making, and work monitoring. The finding suggests that the implementation of MIM in managing work reinforce the status quo of top management through congregation on employees, force commitment, and illusion of consensus.

# Introduction

The usage of MIM application such as WhatsApp and Telegram as a new way to communicate has become popular (Church & Oliveira, 2013) among many smartphone users. MIM is a mobile app that provides real-time communications service (Wu, Lu, Gong, & Gupta, 2017). MIM also attracted many users due to it simple and fun tool for communicating with family, friends and others. It provides users with several attractive features such as free SMS fees (Duggan, 2015), photo, videos, locations, and documents sharing (Oghuma, Libaque-Saenz, Wong, & Chang, 2016), and free voice and video call with multiple users (WhatsApp, 2018). Malaysia demonstrates the second highest use of WhatsApp with a reported population share of 68 percent (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, picture, voice, and graphic. 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, WhatsApp application started the first MIM by allowing users to share text, picture, video and audio for free. Users can even choose to use the application through smartphone 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 invitation, approval document, and request letter. (So, 2016). Some even employ this application as a medium to conduct meetings and arrive to enforceable decisions. While this development is plausible, there are possible disadvantages that business and organizations may have overlooked. In South Korea, some employees complained that its usage has infringed on employees’ personal time outside office hours (Guardian, 2016). This practice is more pervasive in Malaysia that led to one trade union proposing the government to develop legislation to ban such practices (World of Buzz, 2018). One study even suggested that interruption from MIM applications affect individual and group quality performance (Gupta, Li, & Sharda, 2013).

Whilst 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 on MIM at the workplace is more concern with the benefits of the application. For example, online survey 470 respondents show that the usage of MIM in supporting relationship with customers can contribute to customer care and in support of the customer journey (Marino & Lo Presti, 2019). In other study by Vivian & Ronald (2015) with 245 Hong Kong real estate agents suggest that their MIM use and affordances were positively associated with job performance and satisfaction.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a lessez-faire attitude among MIM researchers on the potential drawback 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 relation compared to studies involving enterprise systems such 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 see 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 later, thus preparing them for any eventuality due to the technology’s usage.

# Literature Review

## Mobile Instant Messaging

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

Studies in 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 its users. For example, a research by Wolf (2000) suggests an increase in emoticon use when using instant messaging to display emotions to other users. Meanwhile, recent studies on MIM has focused on the implication of MIM usage among members of society. For example, Wu et al. (2017) conducted a research on the antecedents of active usage of MIM. The findings suggest that MIM function 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 the barriers between different levels in the organization, hence increasing the communication between professional staff (Isaacs, Walendowski, & Ranganathan, 2002). Meanwhile, recent studies focuse on the impact to the organization and its members. One study suggests that IM has no significant effect on employee job satisfaction, work performance and 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 the organization’s power relations.

## Power in Organization

Study on power in organization can be divided into three categories: sources of power, 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, power process refers to events and activities that change the power relations in organization. The changes come from a few factors such as organization 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 from the change in power relation. The outcomes include power shift (Clegg, 1989) and power struggle (Van Bunderen, Greer, and Van Knippenberg, 2018). Table 1 provides an explanation to the three categories of studies on power in organization.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| 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 environment such as grants | Salancik & Pfeffer (1977) |
|  | Network Centrality | It is 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 | Human relations culture 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 employees’ confidence and capability to overcome workplace challenges | Jones, Jimmieson, & Griffiths (2005). |
|  | Organizational Leadership | High quality relationship between leader and employees increases employees’ 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 | Relationship or network exists between practitioners and researcher in implementing a new IS technology. In this situation, the researcher provides practitioners with the organizational culture and norm 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. The low power actors in the organization led the group by emphasizing collaboration and learning in order to promote multicultural organizational development (MCOD) effort. | Hyde (2018) |
|  | Technology | A study on technochange (technology change and organizational change) found, it is not easy to find a significant improvement in organizational functioning and performance with or without technology. Effective design skill and implementation process help in reducing failure risks. Successful technochange requires complement technology, alignment between technology solution and organization process, culture and incentives, and benefit arrangements | Markus (2004) |
| Power Outcome | Power Shift | Study on ‘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 struggle. This power struggle, in the end, is expected to negatively affect team performance. | Van Bunderen, Greer, and Van Knippenberg (2018) |

Table 1: The summary of Study on Power in Organization

# Research Methodology

## Research Design

This study will adopt explorative and interpretive case study research methodologies which could lead to the new finding and not prejudiced by a priori hypotheses (Hale, Dulek, & Hale, 2005). Case study research method helps researchers to understand how and why particular business situation exits. Besides that, using an empirical evidence from ‘real people in real organization 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 managements, officers and general staffs.

## Data Collection

This study was conducted at the procurement department of a utility company in Malaysia. The department contains 127 numbers of employees, comprising 1 general manager, 3 senior manager, 7 managers, 44 executives and 72 non-executive staffs. In this study, general manager, senior manager, and manager will be group together as management. For this study, we interviewed 21 respondents through six group interview sessions lasting between forty to sixty minutes. The respondents were selected by the management based on the study’s requirements. The interview participants were selected from different level of the organization’s hierarchy and 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 staffs: | Non-executive | Tender,  Shared service management | 7 |
| **Total** | | | **21** |

Table 2: Number and roles of participants in PSS Department

To provides flexibility and convenience to the respondents, the interviews were conducted at their workplace. The interview began with broad questions and progressed to more specific questions on their usage of MIM in managing work. The questions revolved around the three components of power relations in organization: sources of power, changes of power, and power outcome. 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 consisted of four activities. The first activity involved identifying symptoms of changes in power relations due to the use of MIM for work management. Next, the identified symptoms will be illustrated through scenarios. In this study, there scenarios were identified and described: work instruction, work monitoring, and decision making. The third activity involved discussing the scenarios in relation to the state-of-the-art knowledge on power relations. The last activity in the data analysis process involved 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 Finding

## Organizational Background

The organization in this study is a utility company in Malaysia. Its core business involved the generation, grid and distribution of utility. 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 utility.

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 order, online purchase, invoice, contract administration, master data administration, tender administration and vendor services. This department comprises three units: Contract Management, Procurement Operation, and Shared Service Management unit.

The 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 PSS department group, unit group, team group, and other informal group among colleague were formed. The involvement in the WhatsApp group depends on their position, unit, and teams of the staff. As mention by one of the manager:

*‘...in WhatsApp the senior manager will join all manager group, 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 colleague, updating task progress to the managers, giving work instructions to general staffs, sharing work issues with the managers and colleague, 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 are an urgent task, we did a meeting in WhatsApp first, the documentation come later…’*

## Data Analysis

### Case 1: Work Instruction

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Position | Before MIM Implementation | After MIM Implementation |
| Management | Assign task to the appropriate unit involve 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, the management will assign a task to an appropriate officer through email. Next, the respective officer will delegate the task to the appropriate team and staff and process ended 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 its progress to the management. In other words, the management relied on the officer to provide the latest update on the task that he/she has assigned. However, with the introduction of MIM for this task, the management are less reliant on their officer for the delivery of instruction and the update of its progress. Now, the management can directly disseminate their instructions through the technology. Moreover, the management can limit the scope of the message only to those who are relevant for the task. In other words, the message can be delivered directly to a particular staff in particular team. According to a manager:

*‘….example if we have system error …… I will screen shot the error and share in the WhatsApp group for solution …’.*

*‘….example, if I requested certain data through WhatsApp group …. the communication is faster compare 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 staffs |  |  |

Figure 4: The decision making process

Figure 4 above shows the decision making process in the department before and after the introduction of MIM. Before the introduction of MIM, the process starts with the management identifying the issues for discussion and proceeded with the setting up of a meeting and inviting the relevant staff. Next, the respective management and officer discussed the issues and arrived at a decision. Lastly, the decision was shared with the team through face-face meeting or email. On the other hand, the use of MIM for decision making enables the process to also include general staff. Once an issue has been identified by a management, all the respective officers and genral staffs will be involved in the 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 it will be shared through the MIM group. As quoted by one of the officer:

*‘.... the manager shares one issue, …. we will have sharing session in the WhatsApp group…....’*

*‘... during the brainstorming session, …. The Senior manager…… make 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 involve five stages. It started with the management acquiring the task progress from 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 compiled the necessary information and updated the progress to the particular officers. The officers then updated the progress to the management. The use MIM technology, however, reduced the steps to three. The reduction occurred because the management do not have to go through the officers to acquire the progress updates. Instead, the managements can acquire the task progress by sending a message directly to the appropriate WhatsApp group. Instead of the officers, the respective general staff can directly update the progress in the WhatsApp group. As mention by one of the managers:

*‘…. I forward the information on the vendor to the Vendor Registration WhatsApp group ……I will ask the respective staff to update the status of this vendor registration…. They will immediately update the status in WhatsApp group……’*

*...if I didn’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 the authority |

*Table 5: Finding of power relation*

The power to introduce MIM into the organization came from the hierarchical authority (Bloom et al., 2014), i.e. it was introduced by the managements of the firm.

The explicit demarcation of duties remains despite the introduction of MIM to the workplace (Hyde, 2018; Shu and Lewin, 2018). The power in the organization is still dominated by the management who make all the decisions. The technology only replaces the medium in which the discussion for the decision took place. Meanwhile, the officers still hold the responsibility of monitoring the progress and ensuring the completion of tasks in the organization. Meanwhile, the general staffs are still expected to personally implement the task. Despite being able to now join the discussion on a decision and provide an update directly to the managements, their roles are still limited by where they are in the organization’s hierarchy.

As the result, the anticipated power shift (Held, 2000) never took place. Instead, the management was able to strengthen its stronghold on the lower level employees. The managements are now able to use MIM to bypass the officers to give instructions and monitor the progress of tasks. Unfortunately, the officers received a bad deal from the use of MIM in managing work. Their significance in the department has been lessened by a great extent due to the further reaches of the managements. The same can be said of the general staffs. Due to the ability of the technology to directly connect different levels of the organization, they are being monitored directly by both managements 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 are basically no changes in power relations due to the use of MIM. Instead, the introduction of MIM to the workplace has strengthened the domination of the managements over the rest of the employees. The technology made the demarcation between the three levels in the organization more explicit. The instructions and directions will come from the top while the officer 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 in an organization. The reinforcement of the status quo started with the ability of the MIM technology to gather all level of employees in one platform. The virtual gathering of all employees enabled 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 not received a particular message, especially from managements.

Indirectly, the technology ‘forces’ the employees to commit to a particular decision. In addition to sharing messages among member, 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). Whilst 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 became a mechanism for managements to indirectly solicit commitment from the group members (Pielot, Church et al., 2014). It happened because the technology leans more towards giving and accepting messages rather than providing an avenue for extensive discussion on work issues. Eventually, the officers and general staffs simply gave up any chance of a discussion and simply accept the decisions and directions from the managements.

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

# Conclusion

MIM usage such as WhatsApp in organization have the potential to change power relations. Its usage today is not only limited to communication as it is also as a platform for managing work such as giving instruction, monitoring work, and making decision. This study explores the effect of MIM usage on power in organization. The data from this study showed that the usage of MIM in managing work reinforces the status quo in the organization. The MIM usage in the organization allows the managements reach different level of employees at any point of time. It’s allowed the instruction or decision to be shared will all of the members. Indirectly, it reinforces the power of management in the organization.

This study offers several key theoretical contributions. Firstly, it adds to the knowledge on IS and power relations in organization. Before, knowledge on the power and IS technology was mainly based on the enterprise system. This study examines the communication system in an organization. Secondly, this research also adds to the knowledge on MIM and power relations dimension when it is used for managing work. Thirds, this research will enhance understanding on how simple mobile applications such as mobile instant messaging can have a great effect on status quo. Besides that, this study also provides several practical contributions. First, it helps enhance management understanding on effect of MIM in organization. Besides that, it helps management in designing guidance or policies on MIM usage in organization.

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