

## **Seeking Expert Opinion Online: An Exploratory Research**

By

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### **Abstract**

*The widespread use of computer conferencing for instructional purposes, both as an adjunct to and a replacement for the traditional classroom, has encouraged instructors and students alike to approach teaching and learning in ways that incorporate collaborative learning and social construction of knowledge. Computer chatting constitutes of discussions and dialogs among any “chat partners”, between instructor and students and among students themselves. Computer chatting is used synchronously, allowing real-time, interactive, and simultaneous online chats or open sessions among many participants. The study employed exploratory design, while the population of the study is made up of Master of Business Administration students of the American University of Science and Technology. A sample of 78 students who engage in chatting online was selected conveniently based on their course of study. The purpose of this study is to assess to what extent MBA students are able to develop their knowledge of selected management topics by seeking professionals’ opinions online.*

**Keywords:** *AUST, Chatting, Expert Opinion, MBA students, Unconventional Learning*

### **1. Literature Review**

The Internet has revolutionized the computer and communication world in dramatic dimensions. The invention of the telegraph, telephone, radio and computers set the stage for this unprecedented integration of telecommunications capabilities. The Internet is at once a world-wide broadcasting capability, a mechanism for information dissemination, and a medium for collaboration and interaction between individuals and their computers irrespective of the geographic location. The Internet represents one of the most successful examples of the benefits of sustained investment and commitment to research and development of information infrastructure (Leiner, Cerf, Clark, Kahn, Kleinrock, Lynch, Postel, Roberts and Wolff, 2010, p.1). Beginning with the early research in packet switching, the government, the industry and the academia have been partners in evolving and deploying this exciting technology.

According to Leiner et al. (2010), the history of the Internet revolves around four distinct aspects, namely:

**Technological evolution:** It began with early research on packet switching and the Advanced Research Projects Agency Network - ARPANET (and related technologies) and continued to current research to expand the horizons of the infrastructure along several dimensions, such as scale, performance, and higher level functionality.

**Social aspect:** This has resulted in a broad community of “Internauts” working together to create and evolve the said technology.

**Operations and Management aspect:** It is an aspect of a global and complex operational infrastructure.

**Commercialization aspect:** This aspect has resulted an extremely effective transition of research results into a broadly deployed and available information infrastructure (pp. 1-2).

The aforementioned aspects demonstrate that the Internet is both a collection of communities as well as a collection of technologies. Its success is directly related to the satisfying of the needs of the community

and the utilization of the community in an effective way to further develop and upgrade the infrastructure capability. According to Gotved (2006), "In the context of online communication, the social structure furthermore includes the technology's shaping of reality through its addition of an interrelated kind of structure. This structure is also about stable patterns or features; it constitutes the possibilities for interactivity and communication, the underlying ideologies of designs and organizations, connections and networks." Although there is no 'physical' space in cyberspace, online community forums are created using software that has been specifically designed to give participants a sense of space through which they can navigate (Feldstein, 2009).

The coordination of the stakeholders' efforts have led to further developments in electronic mail, file sharing, remote access, and eventually World Wide Web capabilities. Applications improved the use of online tools to accomplish electronic commerce, information acquisition, and community operations. The Internet grew to over 50,000 networks on all seven continents and outer space, with approximately 29,000 networks in the United States (Leiner et al., 2010, pp. 11-13).

On October 24, 1995, the Federal Networking Council (FNC) unanimously passed a resolution defining the term '*Internet*'. This definition was developed in consultation with the leadership of the Internet and Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) Communities.

*FNC agrees that the following description reflects the accepted definition of the term "Internet". "Internet" refers to the global information system that (i) is logically linked together by a globally unique address space based on the Internet Protocol (IP) or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons; (ii) is able to support communications using the Transmission Control Protocol/Internet Protocol (TCP/IP) suite or its subsequent extensions/follow-ons, and/or other IP-compatible protocols; and, (iii) provides, uses or makes accessible, either publicly or privately, high level services layered on the communications and related infrastructure described herein.*" (FNC, October 2005).

Surpassing all previous means of communication developed, the Internet facilitated electronic mail; a tool which allowed individuals to have their personal identification tags that allowed them to immediately access their mail sent through the Internet connection. Messages are sent and received from one sender to another instantaneously. Another prominent and highly accessed service provided by the Internet is "Chatting". This service allows real-time interaction among users across the globe over the Internet. Chatting may serve many purposes such as chatting for fun, chatting as a means to get to know people socially, and lastly, chatting as a learning tool (Frizler, 1995).

The average Lebanese Internet population, as estimated in 1998 was around 50,000; it increased to 100,000 by 2002 (Karam, 2002). In 2004, this population became 120,000; however, by June 2010, it grew to 1,000,000 users (Internetworldstats, 2010: Online1). Moreover, heavy marketing campaigns were executed by the Lebanese Internet Service Providers (ISP); the results of which were reflected in a price war that lowered Internet fees. Since 2007, there has been 15 ISP companies (Lebanese Ministry of Telecommunications, 2010). Today the Lebanese Government has facilitated DSL (Digital Subscriber Line) lines via public telephone services. Chat partners (Chatters) were rarely talked about in 1998, today most Internet users chat. According to Chehimi (2002), in a study on multilingualism, over 72% of the Internet users chatted at least once a day. Ten years later, almost all Internet users chat, a fact that affects positively the purpose of the current study. Today, as of February 26, 2012, almost all Internet users chat with 1,367,220 subscribers to Facebook's website (Internetworldstats, 2012).

### ***Chatting and Education***

Chatting is a text-based real-time communications tool (Hodson, 1998). Chatting enables two or more people, who are simultaneously connected to the Internet, to hold live, interactive conversations (Laudon & Laudon, 2010, p. 294). This kind of communication may include exchanging information on a general

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chat applet, instant private messages, voice messages through the use of teleconferences, etc. Chat sessions can be ongoing and scheduled for a specific topic, time, and duration.

Traditionally, chatting is not seen related to education, but as a fun avenue: Most people conduct chatting for entertainment. Not only that, chatting does not have a good reputation due to its potential of turning into chaos since chatters often miss the rules and do not follow order; consequently, they make the discussion difficult. Maybe that is why people might not perceive it as a proper educational tool.

However, chatting has the potential to help professionals assess their students' learning by giving them control over the students' interactions with the media, and prompting the learners' reflection (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, and Jones (2010, September, p. xvi). So, if it is approached adequately, chatting is capable of enhancing the learning experience and opening opportunities for high quality and in-depth discussions (Weber & Lieberman, 2003, p.1).

According to Means et al. (2010, September), online learning has become popular because of its potential to provide more flexible *access to content and instruction at any time, from any place*. Frequently, the focus entails (a) increasing the availability of learning experiences for learners who cannot or choose not to attend traditional face-to-face offerings, (b) assembling and disseminating instructional content more cost efficiently, or (c) enabling instructors to handle more students while maintaining learning outcome quality that is equivalent to that of comparable face-to-face instruction (p. 1).

Moreover, Means et al. (2010, September) assert that different technology applications are used to support different models of online learning. For example, using asynchronous communication tools (e.g., e-mail, threaded discussion boards, newsgroups) to allow users to contribute, at their convenience and using synchronous technologies (e.g., webcasting, chat rooms, desktop audio/video technology), to approximate face-to-face teaching strategies such as delivering lectures and holding meetings with groups of students. Earlier online programs tended to implement one model or the other. More recent applications tend to combine multiple forms of synchronous and asynchronous online interactions as well as occasional face-to-face interactions (ibid).

Chatting, in the last decade, has been given more value as a supporting tool to distance learning (Graziadei, Gallagher, Brown & Sasiadek, 2000; Hodson, 1998). Students enrich their knowledge through chatting and benefit from professionals' points of view on different subjects. It is a way to cover the deficiency of the absence of face-to-face interaction. The fact that there is much more room for asking questions through chatting and probing deeply for answers allows in-depth discussions rather than a physically interactive dialogue. A person would be more reluctant to initiate a conversation –or to break the ice- with someone whom he/she has accidentally met, whilst it is easier to do so on the phone, for example.

A recent research of the U.S. National School Boards Association (NSBA) shows that college students spend equal amount of time at their computers as watching television; moreover, a significant amount of hours on the computer is not used only for video gaming and purely recreational ends, but also for educational activities such as “studying” or “creating and sharing content”. Also, NSBA data show that 59% of the children and college students interviewed uses the Internet to download or search for texts and educational content, and to find information or news related to teaching, while 50% uses the network as an extension of the group work done at school: to “do the homework”, to connect to virtual classes, to realize collective online works, to receive tutorship and assistance from teachers. Students who are digitally literate or “digital natives (Palfrey & Gasser, 2008)” are increasingly using the web to also socialize and as a way of self expression: 25% of them update their site every week, 30% publish their own blogs, and 17% update their site weekly (NSBA, 2007).

According to Foehr (2006), multitasking is a significant feature that characterizes the way in which digital natives approach digital technologies; it is quite frequent, for example, for young people to chat and listen to music while studying, and at the same time remain in contact with the group of peers through Messenger or other instrument for social networking. Moreover, Cavalli, Costa, Ferri, Mangiattordi, Mizzella, Pozzali, Scenini and Paganoni (2009) have observed that digital natives can actually make use of a large amount of social communication tools that represent the well known features of the so called Web 2.0: from Habbo to My Space, from Facebook to Twitter, from MSB Messenger to FriendFeed, from Slideshow to LinkedIn, from YouTube to Wikipedia, not mentioning the blogs.

### ***Chatting and Education in Lebanon***

Chehimi (2002), in an exploratory study on assessment of Lebanese student's attitude on chatting on-line, found that 72.5% of the students chat. The chat tool mostly used was MSN (45.8%). Another 45.8% use a mixture of ICQ (I Seek You), MSN (Microsoft Network), and Yahoo. In addition, 62.7% chat for less than two hours per day, 35.6% chat between two and four hours, and 1.7% chat for more than four hours per day. Moreover, Chehimi found that 76.3% of the students chat in English, 10.2% chat in English and Arabic, while the rest use a mixture of languages. Sixty one percent of the chatters are aware of Internet Netiquette; all chat users have e-mails, and 84.7% have Hotmail addresses, 64.4% belong to chat groups, local and international and only 13.6% have their own chat rooms.

As for multilingualism in chatting, Chehimi (2000) found that 90% of the participants use English letters with Arabic sounds (the text sounds Arabic for any Arab reader even if the student does not know a foreign language, but the reader only needs to be familiar with the English phonics-letters and sounds). Furthermore, 85% use a mixture of Arabic and English conversational statements while chatting. Thirty nine percent of the sample uses the mixture of three languages, namely, English, Arabic, and French, but one percent only uses a different mixture of three languages, namely, English, Arabic and Armenian.

What was so amazing in the chat language used among Lebanese students is the mixture of languages that range between two or three languages and sometimes more. This also reflects the multilingual society they live in and in which they were brought up. The flexibility in shifting from one language to another is also salient. A Lebanese student can be addressing some one in Arabic, if the respondent answers in French, the Lebanese student tries to make use of his/her French even if it is not that good. This is what makes a Lebanese so unique among the Arabic - speakers; they have high flexibility in the use of languages. Finally, Chehimi found that when one accessed a chat room administrated by Arab chatters (Saudi, Syrian, or other non Lebanese), the use of written Arabic (using Arabic letters and sounds) was salient; whereas, in Lebanon's rooms (administrated by Lebanese) the use of written Arabic was rarely seen.

Hejase (2000, 2004) conducted an exploratory study using chatting as a learning and a research tool in management topics. The study was conducted between 1998 and 2002, on two groups of MBA students (166 and 243 students) from the Lebanese American University (LAU)—Beirut, Lebanon. Students' Internet use initially was concentrated mainly into browsing and searching for topics, but very few chatted, leading to some students withdrawing from the study; specifically, 19% (first experiment) and 17% (second experiment). However, students who continued completed the experiment successfully. Since then, and after two years, students have been getting the best of chatting by gaining the ability to analyze collected information critically, at the same time expanding their social networks to include foreign professionals. It is worth mentioning that students reported in their findings that they were inclined to appreciate the American Online Experts' inputs about the management topics in question; a fact which the students labeled 'practicality'. Other professionals, belonging to different nationalities, varied in their approach due to their ethnocentric preferences.

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As for the overall learning experience of such an exploratory research tool (chatting), although it was not generalized because of its limited application in one university, it gave good motivation to include chatting in the syllabi of management courses.

The observed positive impact on the students, as reflected through their comments after the assignment in posterior semesters, was encouraging. The implications of the aforementioned research matched very much those observed by Frizler (1995) who used the online learning as an educational tool in English. She found the following improvements:

- Exposure to natural language outside the classroom
- Collaboration among participating students
- Student's responsibility for learning
- Motivation and enjoyment of the learning process (even if realized at the end of the exercise)
- Cross-cultural communication
- Awareness of global issues and concerns (as taken from professionals and experts)
- Creative outlets and opportunities for publication (in this case the continuous communication with selected respondents)
- Development of computer skills.

Adding to the above, skills learnt in the current research were

- Development of Internet literacy
- Development of chat programs literacy, including ethics, symbols and chat abbreviations and acronyms
- On-line collaboration

However, the research using chatting faced many limitations. The most prominent ones were (Hejase, 2004):

#### ***Lack of a Formal Technology Acceptance Assessment***

The researcher did not conduct a formal assessment of students' attitude toward using chat programs.

#### ***Students Resistance to dedicate extra effort to learning the use of chat programs***

42 students did not submit the assignment because they simply refused to take the challenge of this assignment. Many others lacked chatting experience so they were not skilled in attracting professionals to respond to their attempts to start online conversations. This group later decided to use emails.

#### ***Accessing Chat Programs on Campus***

Internet Relay Chat (IRC) was intended to be the principle program to use for chatting. However, due to the Information Systems Department Firewalls (filters to protect information inside the university), IRC could not be approached through the on-campus Internet Labs. Therefore, most of the chat users accessed the program from their homes or from Internet Cafes in the city of Beirut. Other chat programs were accessed as well.

#### ***Accessing Information from Selected Chat Sites***

Difficulties reported varied from connection problems, to saving the chat conversations—especially if connected via a JAVA browser, to electricity outages that were common to Lebanon as a consequence of the war aggressions at that period.

#### ***Accessibility to Professionals in the Chat Rooms***

Most of the experts or professionals that chatted during the day were people who accessed the system during work breaks or at the end of the day. The probability that managers were willing to dedicate this brief time to technical and profession- related discussions was considerably small.

### ***Indecent Language & Highly-out-of-place Comments***

Although most chat rooms advertise that their environments are controlled for unethical behavior, still many persons throw in offensive statements.

### ***Multi Party Chatters in Different Subjects at One Time***

Multi party chatters environment may cause loss of control of the conversation, since the full concentration and seriousness of a potential manager is very hard to achieve; a fact that probably will lead to poor quality and quantity of shared information and knowledge.

### ***Credibility of Chatters***

Being a resident of the virtual community of the Internet, one feels unbounded to the rules of providing real identities in a conversation.

### ***The requirement to Chat with Five Different Managers from Five Continents***

Most students were upset of this requirement that sounded impossible at some point since the heaviest users of Internet chatting are Americans. However, students were told to be creative in their selections, like chatting with Americans abroad working for foreign companies.

As for the components that should be present in order for a person to be able to chat, they are:

**Hardware:** Computer, modem.

**Software:** Internet software (e.g. internet explorer), in some cases a chat software is needed (ICQ, Yahoo Messenger, MSN Messenger, ...).

**Accessibility to a network:** Internet connection via an Internet Supply Provider (ISP), Local Area Network (LAN), World Area Network (WAN).

**Willingness to chat** (it is not enough to have the previous components to do chatting, many people have them, yet use it for Internet access only).

**Knowledge:** The know how to use chat software or chat sites.

According to Smith (2006), the virtual community has certain rules that should be followed by all members to make their conversations more manageable and understandable. The virtual community is characterized by having most of the interaction verbal rather than behavioral and virtual rather than physical. Therefore, certain acronyms reflecting virtual overt behavior in a typed form are used. Rules are also necessary in chat sessions, especially when the chat session is conducted for educational purposes (Para. 9-10).

### ***The Way Chatting is Conducted***

As stated earlier, while chatting, synchronous forms of communication occur at the same time; hence, all participants have to be on-line in order for communication to take place. There are a number of applications that fall into this category, and the list is growing. Simply write chatting on a search engine and there will be a huge number of alternatives.

Of the many forms of synchronous communication (Netphone, Video conferencing, interactive games, and Chat), chatting is the approach used in this study. Chat is a system that permits users to exchange messages between computers in real-time. Chat can be conducted via many channels, for example, chat rooms, discussion groups, and instant messenger.

According to Neuge (2004), Internet conversation following any of the approaches involves two paradigm shifts. To bring into being an “electronic interactive conversational analysis” requires a crossover between print and conversation-based analysis and theorization. Firstly, there is the shift from print to soft copy. Computer interactivity can have several voices going at once or a synchronous communication. An example is in chat rooms where there can be multiple conversations involving many parties. One does not wait for the response. A second paradigm shift is on the notion of “discourse”. There are further developments taking place in the Internet interactive environment. That is, there are

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shifts from e-mail and discussion groups to instant messaging. Instant messaging allows participants to create their own private chat channels. The instant messaging system alerts a person whenever someone on his/her private list is online, the targeted person can initiate a chat session with that particular individual (pp. 30-35).

All new methods of communication via Internet are opening the way for education to be transmitted in several ways. A combination of the tools described above would enable the information recipient to gain as much knowledge as possible in the most advanced, self-paced and exposed methods available at the turn of the new century. Moreover, distance learning projects can also make available a wealth of educational resources to improve local educational and training capabilities, offering cost saving and effective alternatives to overseas studies (Guessoum, 2000).

### ***The Pedagogy of Chatting***

The last decade has presented multiple research efforts on the pedagogy of learning via the Internet. Olcott and Wright (1995) insist on the fact that the responsibility for instructional quality and control, the improvement of learning and the aggregate effectiveness of distance education still rests on the faculty.

Dietz (1998), as quoted by Hodson (1998), outlines the basic instructor/student interactions in the traditional learning process which include pre-, post- and in-class materials, instructor and student questions, gauging students' reactions and evaluating students' comprehension. These interactions should be also found in E-learning. Finally, Graziadei et al. (2000), Johnstone (1992) and Twigg (1992) affirmed that technology does not guarantee productivity; but coupled with changes in pedagogy, economies of scale, and a paradigm shift to individualized, self-paced mastery learning, technology can make greater learning productivity possible.

Chatting can be considered and applied as a tool for electronic learning (elearners.com, 2010: Online). E learning is a type of learning that uses a network, which may be a LAN or WAN, for the delivery, interaction, and facilitation. E-learning may be realized through several approaches, which are:

1. Distance learning: It is learning in which the instructor and the students are physically in separate locations. It can be either synchronous or asynchronous.
2. Computer based training (CBT): It is the training or the instruction where a computer program provides motivational feedback in place of a live instructor.
3. Web based training (WBT): It is the training which is delivered over a network (LAN, WAN, or Internet). (elearners.com, 2010: Online).

According to Gomez-Mejia, Balkin and Cardy (2010), using CBT and WBT for e-learning has been increasing in popularity because this approach offers content and administration of the training. A general estimate is that companies can reduce their training costs by 50 to 70 percent by using e-learning because individuals can access training at anytime and from any place where an Internet connection is available (p. 283).

Learning can be both synchronous (which is any chatting where interaction happens simultaneously in real-time) and asynchronous (any chatting event where interaction is delayed over time). Moreover, the phrase "Asynchronous Learning" is often used in discussions by people who encourage distance learning. According to Wilson (1997), one has to strike a careful balance in the tradeoff between synchronous and asynchronous time. Discussion Forums for example, are in asynchronous form (Forum: Smaller topic areas within a conference are called forums; they provide the conference with its structure of conversation). While, Net meeting chats are held in real time and therefore count as synchronous learning. Synchronous chat programs allow individuals, at a distance, to communicate via computers more or less in real time. One is able to post comments and have

others see and respond immediately to them. Of course, the individuals have to be connected at the same time and be logged onto the system. So, one has to coordinate with another for a meeting time to get together online when one wants to use the program (Hodson, 1998, Wilson, 1997). Table 1 shows advantages and disadvantages of both methodologies (Hejase, 2000).

**Table 1. Advantages and Disadvantages of Synchronous and Asynchronous Interactions**

<b>Synchronous Interaction</b>	
<b>Advantages</b> Multiple interaction Negotiation of meaning Thinking in target language Fosters sense of belonging Relaxed environment Share thoughts	<b>Disadvantages</b> Frozen screens during communication Requires moderate typing skills Might require highly cultured individuals Time constraint
<b>Asynchronous Interaction</b>	
<b>Advantages</b> Elimination of time & distance constraint Shift in authority from teacher to student Saves paper Immediacy of response(student gets answers directly not after class session ends) Reaches many students at one time, with ease	<b>Disadvantages</b> Asynchronous interaction (not real time) Delays in distribution of messages Too much information for recipients Lack of opportunity for immediate negotiation of meaning can result in flaming Do not share thoughts

Chatting can facilitate the learning process. It allows instructors to do oral online quizzes, which is a good method of evaluating what has been taught. Oral quizzes, moreover, increase the interaction between the instructor and the students as it allows better understanding of concepts. Oral quizzes increase instructor-student interaction by means of a dialogue where information is continuously added up; thus, creating value and educational benefits. For example, distant learners who do not have frequent interaction with their instructors may not understand the sought after concepts; however, when a student is questioned, he/she him/herself will know to what extent he/she had grasped the assigned material/ concepts/ knowledge.

The value added implication of chat is that it preserves a running record (log) of an entire conversation that can be referenced. This makes it a particularly effective real-time communication means for anyone with short term or auditory memory impairments (Uncivilization.net, n.d.).

Inviting guest speakers to chat sessions is another good way of online instruction; it allows students to share their information and benefit from professionals' opinions. According to Feldstein (2009), online communities are all about sharing. Members share their opinions, advice, experiences, and stories.

*Besides the educational use of chatting, it is a cost effective communication tool; the Internet rate per hour is less costly than a far telephone call. Above and beyond, chat is used for marketing and promotional purposes. Company's presentations as well as advertisement are done via Internet. An increasing number of companies hire people to present their products online using people's free time to promote their goods, supposing that people chat in their free time. "Customers today have more control and influence with the brand than ever. We need to make sure it's give and take—a two-sided conversation, with both parties having responsibilities in the interaction." Ann Glover, Chief Marketing Officer, ING Insurance U.S. (IBM Global CMO Study, 2011, p. 2).*

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Chatting is not free from limitations that can be reflected on its probable pedagogical use. Randomly built chat sessions are not very reliable in terms of educational value. Many times, people, being not exposed to direct interaction, are encouraged to pretend; a thing they do not do in real life for fear of being detected. In other words, people, having a hidden personality, may not be honest enough to present information- why should they care?

Thus, chatting cannot be considered an ultimate instructing method. Learning should not totally depend on online chatting. It is true that it assists learners to get an answer in a minute than probing for hours to find it; however, chatting reduces the students' ability to self-learn by doing and exploring, which is one of the learning objectives.

Chatting, being a synchronous tool, poses a major problem for learners if line-disconnection, overloaded servers, and improper connections happened; a fact which is currently common and frequent in Lebanon.

### ***Recorded Experience of Web-Based Courses***

Researchers of the current study were interested in investigating the benefits and the difficulties encountered by other institutions in their application of web courses. In order to investigate this question, the results of three evaluations of web courses at other institutions are compared.

The first example is given by Hara and Kling (1999) of Indiana University. The authors point out that 'many advocates of computer-mediated distance education emphasize its positive aspects and understate the kind of work that it requires for students and faculty.' In their evaluation of a small web course offered by one of the major US universities, they uncovered a range of frustrations and difficulties students faced which actually inhibited their learning at both conceptual and affective levels. The main problems they identified were:

- lack of prompt feedback by the tutor
- ambiguous instructions on the web
- technical problems.

Furthermore, they noted that students' expectations about the course affected their satisfaction with it when the materials or instructions diverged from the students' pre-conceptions.

In a second example, in a graduate health services planning and policy web course at California State University, Bakersfield, the evaluator (Alexander, 1999) revealed that promoting collaboration amongst the students was more problematic than anticipated and concluded that IT used in an exploratory/constructivist model provides excellent opportunities for collaboration... provided care is taken in promoting collaboration, and in presenting and structuring assignments around these communities (p. 22).

Other important findings were that students needed practical and applicable IT instruction and guidance in the learning process, and that acquiring new IT skills was a time consuming task for students.

A third evaluation of a web course comes from the University of British Columbia and concerns a graduate course on distributed learning. The evaluators, Bartolic-Zlomislic and Bates (1999), found that their course was overloaded and the work had to be reduced in subsequent presentations, adjustments had to be made to the conference structure and small group sizes, and the collaborative assignment provoked mixed reactions from students. Some students would have liked a more applied focus to the course and others complained of poor moderation, unanswered questions, and intimidation. Nevertheless, the course was overall very successful and the value of online, asynchronous interaction, access to web resources, collaborative work and ease and flexibility of the web as a delivery medium created a rich learning environment appreciated by most of the students.

## 2. Research Methodology

This paper is exploratory-intent based to assess awareness, response, attitude and willingness to apply chatting as educational tool by a selected group of MBA students at the American University of Science and Technology (AUST) – Beirut, Lebanon. It investigates the extent to which the selected sample of MBA students are aware of the presence of foreign experts ready to share their knowledge, and to assess the extent that students would take to broaden their insights of contemporary management topics using chatting outside the classroom environment. In addition, the purpose of the study is to assess to what extent MBA students are able to develop their knowledge of selected management topics by seeking experts' and professionals' opinions online.

The research instrument consists of chat programs. Data collected for this study consists of the results and evaluations of the experimentation with a chat assignment that was part of the “Contemporary Management” course during the academic year 2009-2010. The sample population consisted of 78 MBA students registered in four “Contemporary Management” classes. Usually, every student class population is stratified along gender, academic status, computer and Internet literacy and academic performance.

### *Tools and Systems Used*

The principal target tool for this research is Chat Programs. The objective is for students to gain professional hands-on insight into the management topics reviewed and discussed in class by chatting or accessing professionals and experts online. Case studies used in class are becoming insufficient to make students sense success or failure of the management concepts. Chatting is intended to be used in this experiment as a value-added tool that may bring life to the abstract topics of management, therefore providing a vivid experience as reflected by professionals who are surfing the Internet and meeting in chat rooms, e-conferences, forums, or other.

Moreover, the researchers seek to confirm what Carlacio and Heidig (2009) aimed at in their research. That is, first, helping students develop a more robust understanding of literacies, particularly those that occur in hybrid spaces: online and on paper. Second, enabling students to be more sophisticated information gatherers and discerners when they work on their assignments, whether they use library resources — digital and print—or when searching the web (p. 3).

### *Chat Research Assignment*

Students chose contemporary debated management topics, for example organization culture, business ethics, and business ecosystems to research. Students reviewed the literature about the topic and prepared a formal report before selecting five ideas of personal interest that reflect innate needs, work experiences, and self-learning goals. They summarized the ideas of interest into brief statements that are not to sound as definitions, in-depth philosophical arguments, or just having fun chat conversation.

Students conducted chats about the selected topics, and obtained responses from professionals and experts who were willing to share their views, therefore, shedding light on personal practical work approaches and offering new insights of the management theories students dealt with in class.

Students had to stick to using chatting as their first priority tool to establish contact. The target professionals should belong to either one of the five different continents. Students were instructed that if, prior to a two-week period to the assignment's deadline no success is achieved in using chatting fully, then they could complement their assignment by using emails or postings to forums and electronic billboards to finalize the given assignment. However, they would gain less credit on the reported assignment if emails only were used.

Students reported the responses using critical thinking approach. Students highlighted notable cultural differences among the responses, and included in their conclusions a general critique of their assignment.

### 3. Data Analysis

This study lasted for two semesters, between 2009 and 2010, during which the selected sample of MBA students' familiarity with chatting improved. Students' Internet use initially was into browsing, searching for topics and chatting for fun. Few students chatted for the sake of acquiring expert knowledge from professionals online.

#### *Sample Demographics*

Findings of the research showed that students, on the average, were 44.87% males (35/78) and 55.13% females (43/78). 15.4% were graduating students (fourth semester), 25.6% were second semester students, 29.5% were third semester students, and 29.5% were new comers. Details are provided in Table 2.

**Table 2. Sample Demographics**

<p><b>Class No. 1 (22 Students)</b></p> <p><b>Gender</b> Male 50 % (11) Female 50 % (11)</p> <p><b>Education Status</b> First semester 36.5 % (8) Second semester 22.7 % (5) Third semester 31.8 % (7) Fourth semester 09.0 % (2)</p>	<p><b>Class No. 2 (31 Students)</b></p> <p><b>Gender</b> Male 51.6 % (16) Female 48.4 % (14)</p> <p><b>Education Status</b> First semester 29.0 % (9) Second semester 25.8 % (8) Third semester 22.6 % (7) Fourth semester 22.6 % (7)</p>
<p><b>Class No. 3 (11 Students)</b></p> <p><b>Gender</b> Male 36.4 % (4) Female 63.6 % (7)</p> <p><b>Education Status</b> First semester 27.3 % (3) Second semester 27.3 % (3) Third semester 36.4 % (4) Fourth semester 09.0 % (1)</p>	<p><b>Class No. 4 (14 Students)</b></p> <p><b>Gender</b> Male 28.6 % (4) Female 71.4 % (10)</p> <p><b>Education Status</b> First semester 21.4 % (3) Second semester 28.6 % (4) Third semester 35.7 % (5) Fourth semester 14.3 % (2)</p>

#### *Computer Literacy*

All students are acquainted with computer use generalities. All students have access to at least two computers other than their own, and all are trained to use Microsoft Office tools including Word, Power point, and Excel. However, when looking into their Internet literacy, one could discern that the different classes had a non-uniform distribution of Internet knowledge. This could be related to the simple fact that students are mostly acquainted with the Internet as a search tool for academic knowledge or for fun only. This result is delineated in Table 3 that shows that the overall Internet literacy levels' averages (based on 78 students) are as follows:

**None 15.4 % (12/78 students)**

**Some 17.9 % (14/78 students)**

**Good 52.6 % (41/78 students)**

**V. Good 14.1% (11/78 students)**

It is important to mention that Internet literacy refers to browsing skills, information search, navigation between Internet and Microsoft office word, email and chatting.

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**Table 3. Sample Internet Literacy**

<p><b>Class No. 1 (22 Students)</b>  <b>Internet Usage</b>                  22.7 % (5) None                  18.2 % (4) Some                  45.5 % (10) Good                  13.6 % (3) V. Good</p>	<p><b>Class No. 2 (31 Students)</b>  <b>Internet Usage</b>      12.9 % (4)                  None                  16.1 % (5) Some                  61.3 % (19) Good                  09.7 % (3) V. Good</p>
<p><b>Class No. 3 (11 Students)</b>  <b>Internet Usage</b>                  09.0 % (1) None                  27.3 % (3) Some                  45.5 % (5) Good                  18.2 % (2) V. Good</p>	<p><b>Class No. 4 (14 Students)</b>  <b>Internet Usage</b>                  14.3 % (2) None                  14.3 % (2) Some                  50.0 % (7) Good                  21.4 % (3) V. Good</p>

***Students' Compliance with the Assignment***

Students decided to follow different approaches to comply with the requirements of this assignment. Three approaches were identified, depending on the students' initial success in chatting. Those who decided to switch to other methods established the initial contact using chatting. The methods employed were

- Using Chat Rooms
- Using Management Forums & Expert Billboards
- Using Emails

Figures 1 and 2 show the addresses of the first two tools used. As for emails, students differed in their contacts according to their search for professional and academic persons around the globe.

**Figure 1. Using chat rooms**

<p>MSN Instant Messenger  <a href="http://www.livebusinesschat.com">www.livebusinesschat.com</a>  <a href="http://www.twitter.com">www.twitter.com</a>  <a href="http://www.facebook.com">www.facebook.com</a>                  Yahoo Messenger  <a href="http://www.ebuddy.com">www.ebuddy.com</a> (Web and Mobile Messenger, Multi Network Chat for MSN, Yahoo, ICQ, AIM, Google Talk, Facebook)  <a href="http://www.Mibbit.com">www.Mibbit.com</a> (ajax IRC client)  <a href="http://www.irc.efnet.pl">www.irc.efnet.pl</a>                  Gmail Chats: chat room communication</p>
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**Figure 2. Using Management Forums & Expert Billboards**

<p><a href="http://www.Linkedin.com">www.Linkedin.com</a>  <a href="http://www.theforumlounge.com">www.theforumlounge.com</a>  <a href="http://www.ukbusinessforums.co.uk">www.ukbusinessforums.co.uk</a>  <a href="http://www.youngentrepreneur.com">www.youngentrepreneur.com</a></p>
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Many of the students who never chatted before had hard time to continue solely with chatting, so, they relied heavily on the use of emails to comply with the requirements of the assignment. Students who did not use chatting were informed that they will not get the assigned grades as compared to the students who did comply with the full assignment requirements, except if they show a creative analysis of their findings. 15.4% of the students involved relied solely on emails: they started their search by using chatting, later by using major search engines to locate international businesses, then, emails were picked from the web sites for the discussion of topics.

#### 4. Results and Findings

The combination of chat and email based assignments were graded according to their abiding of the following requirements:

1. the preparation of a short research report about “Business Ethics” and “business Ecosystems”
2. the usage of chat as a principal program, then professional postings or emails
3. the presentation of a copy of the conversations and / or emails
4. performance of a critical analysis of the answers
5. the overall conclusion and lessons learned

Results of the four classes appear in Table 4. Four grade categories could be observed / distributed between the grades “A to D”.

**Table 4. Grade distribution**

Category	Overall (78)	Males (35)	Females (43)
Grade of A achieved	2 (2.6 %)	0	2 (2.6 %)
Grade of B achieved	49 (62.8 %)	17 (21.8 %)	32 (41.0 %)
Grade of C achieved	26 (33.3 %)	18 (23.0 %)	8 (10.3 %)
Grade of D achieved	1 (1.3 %)	0	1 (1.3 %)
	Total:100.0 %	Total: 44.8 %	Total: 55.2 %

As Table 4 shows, the overall performance was determined as follows:

If we were to take these distributions as an indicator of the success of using “Chatting” as a students’ search tool to seek answers from experts online and for educational purposes, it would be misleading. The main reason would be that although the researcher had previously a notion of the students’ Internet usage/knowledge, and an understanding that those who use the Internet the most are more knowledgeable in chat programs, many students fell under pressure. It is true that all the students have done research papers accessing the Internet, and many knew about the existence of chatting; however, many never tried chatting before to seek experts’ and professionals’ advice.

Nevertheless, the above grade distribution gives us a clear insight of the fact that students, through their years of chatting for amusement, got acquainted with the Internet and consequently with chatting and understood what it can offer. Furthermore, it has come to the researcher’s attention that students who got stuck with this assignment (scoring C or less), made an extra effort during the posterior period between semesters, to cover their deficiency in chat usage. This was brought to the researchers’ attention with statements like *“I was not ready for a chatting assignment; however, currently I chat more frequently, mixing between having fun and doing research”*, and *“I made sure to ask how chatting is done!”*... And *“I wish I had more courses where chatting is required, I think I am ready for more!”*

As for the students who complied with their chat assignment, they continued chatting even after the course was over. Figure 3 shows a selection of students’ comments.

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**Figure 3. Different students' statements about chatting**

“I hated the assignment at first, but when I got acquainted with chatting, I cannot do without it.”  
“I feel addicted with chatting...”  
“I use chatting for other assignments, I rely on real experience...”, and  
“thank you for presenting an educational challenge to us...”

***Students' Learning by Sending Emails***

Students who had sent only emails to comply with their research assignment succeeded, since they were able to search and secure professional responses to their queries. Respondents were from the US, UK, Lebanon (working abroad), India, and Canada. The respondents were willing to help since they themselves got interested in the topics discussed, namely business ethics and business ecosystems. Many statements quoted reflected this willingness. Figure 4 shows some of these statements.

**Figure 4. Experts' statements about their willingness to help**

“This discussion leads to positive outcomes” USA  
“My advise to you: Do unto others what you like others do to you” India  
“Ethics pays. Make sure to have a code of ethics” UK  
“I have my own business twisted code of ethics! It depends on the situation”  
Lebanese abroad  
“From my experience, most companies are very unethical!” Indian in Gulf  
“I am happy I was of help” Canada

One of the researchers instructed students who wanted to email professionals to send one email only at any time to one person. Students used emails as a last resort to complete their assignment even knowing that there was a penalty.

The main message manifested by the experts is the praising of the methodology followed to expose MBA students to best practices through the World Wide Web.

***Cross-cultural Lessons***

The most prominent and salient observation common to many students' assignments, as many as 90%, was that respondent experts and professionals around the globe agreed on the approach of dealing with business ethics and the reality of business ecosystems in improving the status of organizations. However, ethnocentric differences were apparent in the approach experts followed while chatting and addressing business statements. The difference was clear in the manner that promoted looking only for answers (solutions) rather than analyzing the causes. Some respondents stressed the fact that those individuals who are able to provide answers based on the root causes are making lots of money worldwide.

Professionals who were approached using chatting or other methods raised two critical sets of questions. However, the way to deal with these questions reflected cultural preferences. The questions were

1. How serious is business ethics in reality? How well is our corporates working on this issue?
2. To what extent do we appreciate our partners' contribution? Is there really a business ecosystem? Are we able to achieve what we want to achieve?

When looking to characterize the common approaches to deal with these questions as related to the researched papers prepared by the students, one finds that the most important advice provided by most of the respondents is to rely on “common sense”. Several topics were discussed: business ethics, business ecosystems, social responsibility, governance, and organizational culture.

Similar to previous research conducted by Hejase, H. (2000, 2004), it was very interesting to note that students were inclined to praise the “American Opinion” as compared to any other nationalities. American experts and professionals tend to be very practical in seeing things in accordance with what students learned in the class room in the fourth management approach namely, “contingency and systems approach” (Robbins & Coulter, 2009, pp.51-53). The most prominent reason for this inclination is the demonstrated practicality in dealing with the issues, as well as the sarcastic comments they threw in many occasions to reflect their real emotions when hearing some of the questions. Other professionals of Indian, Arab Gulf countries, or Pakistan and Afghanistan were inclined to be very specific, depending on the topic. That is, reflecting ethnocentric preferences like choosing solely monetary rewards for motivation, preferring high control on workers, managing IT strictly by organizational rules, and limiting authority lines. As for European, Canadian, or Australian managers, different attitudes were reflected ranging from strictness to flexible behavior, depending on the size of the firm they work with. Small business managers were inclined to give “opportunity hunt modes” rather than strictly planning modes. Still many of the big firm employees (whatever their nationality was) behaved similarly to that of the American fellows. Sample statements are shown in Figure 5.

Gudykunst and Kim (1995) state that only messages can be transmitted, not meaning. On the basis of the current research, however, the researchers found that in chatting with a limited set of reference points and with common aims and references, students as well as experts expressed their feelings as much as they would in normal conversation, by using text in innovative ways.

**Figure 5. Sample of experts’ and professionals’ comments in chatting**

“What does your professor want from your project?” China

“This discussion actually made me think” USA

“We deal with ethics everyday, but we never stop and think of our actions and how ethical they are!” Australia

“My advise to you: Say what you do and do what you say” India

“Honesty pays on the long run” USA

“An ecosystem is an integrated set of businesses that complement each other. Look into the synergy effect and the complementary setup between products within partnerships... something similar to a social network where everyone learns from the experience ” USA

“To be successful, you need cohesion, harmony, sustainability, synergy, collective energy, hence you need culture” Indian in Gulf

“ I am happy I could help” UK

“The only ethics that works well is religiosity” Syrian

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***Chat Research Assignment: An assessment of the Learning Experience?***

One way to reflect on the success or failure of such an experience is to review the overall students' performance. As was shown in Table 4, 65.4% of the students showed excellent and very good performance reflected by scoring A's and B's (51 out of 78). However, 2.6% of the females scored "A's" versus 0% for the males. Moreover, females scored double the number of B's in comparison to males, that is, 41% or 32 B's for females versus 21.8% or 17 B's for the males. This specific difference was reflected because of the success in using only chatting and the better analysis of the content of their chatting as well as the conclusion of the assignment. It is worth mentioning that extra points were given to students who did very good analysis of the results, even if chat programs were not used. Finally, extra credit was given to those who were able to come up with lessons learned.

The observed positive impact on the students, as reflected through their comments after the assignment in posterior semesters, is encouraging. However, more observation should be made in order to record posterior behavior as related to chat programs especially with students who found difficulty in performing the assignment.

In addition to the above, some statements chosen from written reports are presented herein to support the argument that learning from such a research approach has occurred. Next, a sample of statements showing students' opinions about chatting that reflect the overall educational impact of chatting in the leaning process is presented.

"I have learned that when someone moves from academics to the real world through working, and as one observes what is going on down the road, many personal concepts change such as dealing with stress, ambiguity, and temper."

"I have learned that I should understand well what surrounds and what is inside my work to invest my effort and experience and how to deploy them efficiently and effectively."

"I have learned that in an ecosystem companies complemented each other, and can not function without the complementary products of their partners."

"Chatting exercise helped me realize that business ecosystems are in general positive and practical setups to conduct business."

"Email correspondence is a very big waste of time versus chatting."

"With this new assignment of this course, I explore a new horizon."

"I learned from my chat session that to act ethically you do not need a code of ethics or regulation to govern you, it comes from within."

"I learned from my chat that developing a strong base of values and ethics in one's business can help build a positive reputation and present an image of integrity."

"The chat input brought extensive personal experience in a short period of time ... It gave me new insight about ecosystems."

"After this chat with selected managers, the implementation of the concept business ecosystems in the workplace became clearer to me."

"I learned how to search for business forums on the web and how to be one of the business-community worldwide."

“At first, I had problems since other business people did not answer any questions.”

“It was a good experience to meet a professional person through the web without knowing him in person.”

“After reading about the business ecosystems in the eyes of different researchers and after chatting with different managers, the idea and concept of business ecosystems was simplified and became clearer.”

“At first, I was worried of the idea of finding a site to chat!”

“The challenge, the stress, and the pressure we were subject to, all added character to the exercise.”

“Concerning the chat with professionals, I was surprised when I found that they are interested in responding to the set questions. I thought that managers are busy people and do not have time or they simply dislike to chat.”

“The main lesson from this research is that by sharing ideas with others, one comes up with new ideas and thus gains more knowledge.”

“I learned a new way to find answers to my questions that are not found while searching over different websites.”

“In this chatting exercise, managers provided me with real life examples that helped me understand the theoretical part of my researched topic.”

“Chatting broadened my way of thinking.”

“I could sense how hard it is nowadays to run a business without having business ethics control as part of the compliance and ethics program.”

“Through chatting I had an intense experience of brainstorming.”

“Chatting showed me a different view about business ethics since it showed me that the subject is controversial as evidenced by the comments expressed by different business experts.”

“Chatting constituted a very good experience. I learned many things.”

“This assignment allowed me to explore a new horizon.”

“When I started chatting with my selected expert, we had never discussed similar issues before and I was surprised by how much his opinions were applicable to the material discussed in class.”

“I ran out of time, I decided to use email.”

“This chatting exercise provided me with a wider scope to look at things.”

“This exercise opened great opportunities for students to reach the outer world and talk to managers they do not know.”

“It was so hard to find an expert to chat with me and especially about business ecosystems.”

“I found out that there are many people who still lack the knowledge about business ecosystems.”

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### ***Using Students' Feedback in Revising the Research***

According to Feenberg (1989, p. 26), the use of transcripts or logs is considered the most effective method of tracking online discussion. He contends that retrieve-ability can be a resource for democracy, empowering the individual by allowing space for reflection, so that the individual can make sense of discussions and formulate views without the face-to-face group pressure for instant assimilation and interpretation. Taking this aspect into consideration, the researchers used the logs to analyze the students' feedback.

Following Mason and Weller (2000) in their approach to evaluate their course offered online in the UK Open University environment, the researchers decided to read through all the feedback data from students. Some students were bothered that this assignment was individual and asked for group work; others wanted none at all. Some felt uneasy about the assignment content; others found it the perfect match of both professional and academic skills. It was discovered that several common responses emerged as observed by Mason and Weller (2000), though the students enjoyed the exercise; most repeated of which were

- It is a lot of work for both tutors and students
- The systems, procedures and framework of the course have functioned successfully

## **5. Conclusion**

Several insights may be drawn from this study. First, in relation to answering the question "can chatting be used for learning by seeking expert opinions online", referring to Figures 4 and 5 as well as to section 4.3 and its consequent analysis, it becomes apparent that chatting leads to learning. As stated previously in the pedagogy of learning, Dietz (2000) outlines the basic instructor/student interactions in the traditional learning process that includes pre-, post- and in-class materials, instructor and student questions, gauging student reactions and evaluating student comprehension. We observe that these interactions were found to apply for chatting. As in Graziadei et al. paper (2000), technology does not guarantee productivity, but coupled with changes in pedagogy, economies of scale, and a paradigm shift to individualized, self-paced mastery learning, technology can make greater learning productivity possible.

We have also observed in the current research that students were pre-conditioned as for the rules of the task, which were provided with suggested sites to start with; they were given the motivation to be creative in dealing with the information and knowledge generated in their interaction with their respondents. Continuous advising was available to assure that students do not deviate from the requirements. However, it was up to the students to update themselves on Internet literacy and the usage of chat programs. Consequently, around 15 % of the students were not ready to dedicate the time for the chatting exercise, but instead used email communication. However, this result is better than the 2004 research where 17.3% or 42 out of 243 students refused to undertake the assignment and decided to accept the complete loss of 10% of their final grade.

Therefore, when a formal instructor's direction exists at the course level that is disseminated to all participating students, chatting adds value to the formal teaching process. Another finding that can be drawn from this paper is that the present formal use of chatting as a complementary teaching tool to face-to-face instruction does not exist; however, it is worth mentioning that students believed that they acquired value-added knowledge which is based on real life experience as expressed by the responding experts and professionals online. Considering the fact that one of the researchers is the Dean of the Faculty of Business and Economics and a member of the Curriculum Council at AUST may lead to an active recommendation to incorporate chatting as a support tool to class instruction; therefore, disseminating the positive results expressed by students to other students who believe that their Internet literacy could be focused on sharing applied business experiences with experts online. Another recommendation is to share the findings of the current research with other educational institutions in

Lebanon to serve as a stimulus for further in-depth assessment of chatting as a changing agent to foster applied learning with the theoretical foundations learned inside the classroom. Meanwhile, one recommendation that could be made is that instructors in schools and universities provide a formal coverage of Internet competencies within their subject matter supported by IT lab exercises already incorporated in most textbooks used across Lebanon. Instructors may expose the differences in online applications as related to culture and national preferences; and, thirdly, recommend the use of case studies on contemporary business dilemmas and extract lessons learned. These recommendations are in parallel with what other researchers have found (Frizler 1995; Hejase 2000; Chehimi, 2002; Hejase 2004; Murphy and Collins,1997; and Mason and Weller, 2000).

The advantages of using chatting to support face-to-face course instruction are:

- Fostering immediacy and social presence
- Allowing one-to-one advising
- Presenting timely issues
- Providing useful brainstorming and decision making
- Building a community of learners
- Supplementing other forms of communication

Furthermore, our experience and findings in the chatting research match the findings generated by examining courses from the students' perception of the issues raised by web-based teaching. Feedback from students indicated that their main issues were

- The time it took to become competent with the PC, the Web and/or with computer conferencing
- The sense of accomplishment and satisfaction with the course and the experience it provides of the whole ICT world
- The appropriateness or not, of teaching ICT skills and of working in online collaborative groups.

As for the factors which most affected students' satisfaction, they were relate to

- the support of their professor/tutor or other staff or students
- the amount of time, patience and motivation they have to devote to the course
- the extent to which the course content and presentation fit the students' expectations and learning style.

The aforementioned findings are not inconsistent with the findings of other evaluations of web-related courses at other institutions discussed in section 1.4 previously. It was clear that the problems and the advantages encountered in the current research are in no way unique and seem to be independent of the numbers of students.

Another insight that is considered important for the current study is its academic contribution to the minimal literature found on the subject matter in Lebanon. At the same time we must acknowledge that extensive research applied to other countries of the region are far from being comprehensive. There are only few studies that have addressed blended education in Lebanon (WICTE, 2010). It is important to note that the results of the current research will provide exploratory findings that can be used by other researchers, Middle Eastern or others; consequently, cross-cultural comparisons could be performed. Moreover, another contribution of the current study is its stimulating effect that might lead others to test chatting in education.

This research faced several limitations. The most prominent ones are:

#### **Lack of a Formal Technology Acceptance Assessment**

The researchers did not conduct a formal assessment of students' attitude toward using chat programs.

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### **Students Resistance to Dedicate Extra Effort in Learning to Use Chat Programs**

12 students did not comply with all the requirements of the assignment because they lacked chatting experience; so, they were not skilled in attracting professionals to respond to their attempts to start online conversations. Those decided later on to use emails.

### **Multi Party Chatting Partners in Different Subjects at One Time**

Chatting environment may cause loss of control of the conversation, since the full concentration and seriousness of a potential manager is very hard to attain, probably leading to poor quality and quantity of shared information and knowledge.

Finally, the researchers believe that this paper acts as an invitation to further research studies to discern whether the individual's digital literacy makes a difference in the formation of chat-related judgments, knowing that Lebanon is considered a mosaic multi-lingual community.

Since this study involved a small population in one educational institution, which is a limiting factor to generalize results, the similarity of the value systems with other Lebanese educational institutions may lead to similar results. More research including a wider array of respondents and educational institutions is needed to highlight any differences.

As for the overall learning experience observed in the current research, although at this point it can not be generalized because of the lack of the technology acceptance assessment, it gives good motivation to the continuous use of chatting as an assignment with partial credit (say 10 or 15%) of the total assessment of the management courses or any other major. Since the use of the Internet will continue to be widely spreading, the study encourages faculty, researchers, and trainers to introduce new approaches and designs to offer better understanding of the material, even if the external advice is provided through the Net professionals.

From the results of this research, we have found out that more awareness should be created in universities about the concept of chatting. This awareness is needed at the undergraduate level first, so that students become believers of the strong relationship that chatting has with their business education.

## **6. Future Research**

Conducting a formal causal research is highly possible today in Lebanon or other countries since the status of Internet technology has been upgraded tremendously. Also, students today are highly familiar with chatting, a factor that will eliminate the possibility of exerting pressure on them.

Further research on the topic is highly encouraged: it could be starting with a formal technology assessment, then conducting a content analysis of chats logged at different times, chats that focus on specific tasks and topics, and chats in various disciplines, to determine any protocols needed and useful over varied times and settings. Further investigation could determine optimal pedagogical techniques that could be employed effectively in chatting of different kinds. Because of the growing global community fostered in the computer-mediated communication environment, it would also seem important to determine ways to empower non-native speakers of English with the conventions and protocols necessary to communicate easily in using chatting.

Finally, the growing acceptance and use of instruction implies that instructors and trainers need to know more about how to facilitate chatting that fosters communication and learning in such settings. Models for interaction analysis of asynchronous computer conferencing should be tested in a synchronous chat environment.

The outcome of the research is only descriptive in that the collected opinions online, suggest that majority of experts found online were able and were willing to create a virtual forum to provide unconventional educational opportunity because MBA students were able to add valuable information to their knowledge.

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