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E-Mail is *Not Just* for Old Fogey's:

A Modest Study of E-Preferences Across Generations

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Abstract

Despite the fact that e-mail seems to be the preferred communications medium for college professors, the popular literature discusses a generation gap between younger and older individuals. The older generation reportedly is more comfortable with e-mail, whereas the younger generation appears to favor social networking, instant messaging, and texting. In this study, younger and older individuals were surveyed to learn their perceptions and habits regarding electronic communications. The data from this study show that both younger and older participants use e-mail for work and socialization purposes. This study raises an awareness of perceptions related to electronic communication styles.

What did we do before we had electronic mail (e-mail)? How did we survive? E-mail is so convenient; we send out a missive and wait for a reply. It is so much easier than writing a formal letter (no stamp, no envelope), and less invasive than a phone call. Despite the expediency of e-mail, recent research suggests that e-mail is not as popular for communicating as it was a few years ago. Carnevale (2006) reports that age seems to be a factor in how one perceives and uses e-mail, and Lorenz (2007) proposes that there is a generation gap between first- and second-generation Internet users.

Many college students now consider what seemed to be at the “cutting-edge” of technology not so long ago, too slow and too formal. E-mail is for old people, for business, and for formal correspondence (Fitzpatrick, 2007). These students seem to prefer instant messaging (IMing) or text messaging (also referred to as short message service) as a way of corresponding with friends and colleagues (Carnevale, 2006). Students like being able to reach their friends immediately instead of using e-mail that might not be viewed for hours. Young people were the first to prefer *texting* to e-mail use. This trend may be spreading to other age groups.

Fitzpatrick (2007) reports that although the United States is a leader in e-mail, it has lagged behind other countries in terms of mobile uses. Fitzpatrick describes the preferences of many of the younger generation for social networking and *texting*, suggesting again that e-mail is more suited for work and addressing old people. For example, a poll of 2000 South Korean middle, high school, and college-aged students found that more than two-thirds of them rarely or never use e-mail. Fitzpatrick notes that in the United Kingdom in November, 2007, for the first time there were more visits to

social networks than to web-based e-mail services. Steinhauer and Holson (2008) note that Americans are now using mobile phones for *texting* more than for phone calls.

According to Wikipedia (2008), short message service (SMS) “is the most widely used data application on the planet, with 2.4 billion active users, or 74% of all mobile phone subscribers sending and receiving text messages on their phones”. Some authors discuss the use of social networking sites, such as FaceBook and MySpace, which have become popular communication tools (Fitzpatrick, 2007; Lorenz, 2007; Yoffe, 2007) as well as instant messaging and *texting* (Carnevale, 2006; Fitzpatrick, 2007; Raskin, 2007; Wymer, 2006). Hermes (2008) reports that approximately 70% of Internet users aged 18-29 have posted their profiles on social networking sites.

Do these trends signal the demise of e-mail? In 2002, Werbach cautioned that e-mail could disappear because of the pervasiveness of spam, unless filtering systems get better at keeping unwanted mail from our inboxes. However, six years later, e-mail is still in use, perhaps an indication that the filtering systems did improve. Lorenz (2007), on the other hand, does not believe that e-mail will disappear entirely since there will always be a need to send longer messages. According to Lorenz, g-mail enables the user to IM and e-mail at the same time, and with new mobile phone/Blackberry convergent technologies, people can choose IM, text, social network, or e-mail from the same small mobile device.

Given these proposed age gaps and shifts in computer-mediated communication devices, the purpose of this paper is to explore how e-mail use and preferences vary across age. Survey-based interviews were conducted with a wide variety of adults. Questions focused on the convenience of e-mail use, the challenges and concerns of e-

mail users, the frequency of checking e-mail, and use of alternative electronic communication (such as social networking, instant messaging, and *texting*).

Methodology

The Study

An interview instrument was developed and a modest number representing a wide variety of adults volunteered to participate in our study. The interview questions included basic demographic information: gender, age, educational background, occupation, the necessity of e-mail for work, and whether the participant is a student. We also gathered information (including open-ended questions) about participants' experiences with e-mail: how long they had used e-mail, why they started using e-mail, the frequency of present use, how they use e-mail, ease of use, challenges, and perceived abuses.

Participants were also asked about alternative means of electronic communication that they might use (such as IMing, text messaging, social networking) and their preferences for using them.

Responses were "chunked" so that similar responses were grouped together. Responses were coded and frequencies were noted. There may be more than one response to a question, thus the totals may vary from question to question.

Participants

We interviewed 39 adults from a variety of occupations including social workers, clergy, administrative assistants, artists and writers, teachers, a corporate executive, a karate instructor, an engineer, an actress, a lawyer, and several retired professionals, among others. There were 10 males and 29 females ranging in age from slightly over twenty to mid-eighties. Their level of education ranged from high school diplomas to

doctoral degrees. Most are no longer traditional students, but three were self-declared students. Most of the 39 participants are currently working.

Selected Findings

E-mail use

When asked how long they had used e-mail, twenty-two responded that they have used e-mail 10-20 years and six have used it 21-30 years. Thirty-four of thirty-nine participants use e-mail regularly. Only four are non-users. Frequency of use varies from more than once a day to never. (See Table 1.) Twenty-four reported that e-mail is necessary for their work.

Table 1

Frequency of E-Mail Use

Frequency of e-mail use	More than once a day	Once a day	Several times a week	Never
Participants	26	6	2	4

Age and E-Mail

Survey participants began using e-mail for work or school or to socialize with friends/family and to play games. Participants of all ages seem to like e-mail for similar reasons and find abuses and challenges that are similar. Twenty-six interviewees use e-mail for business and twenty-eight use it for socializing.

Almost all of the e-mail users interviewed (32 of 39) express an affinity for the ease, speed, convenience, and informality of e-mail use. Five individuals like the efficiency of e-mail. Four participants mention that they appreciate the written record of correspondence that e-mail provides. A participant with severe hearing impairment noted

that e-mail is less disruptive to other people than the telephone because of her hearing loss. "It doesn't matter that I am deaf and I feel that I am not as annoying to people or as disruptive as I would be on the telephone." One participant appreciated the time lag that allows one to consider text before it is sent, change one's mind, perfect a message, and correspond at leisure.

Many interviewed (26) responded that they believe e-mail is abused as spam, junk mail, *phishing* messages, forwards, and other mass mail. Five mention abuse through viruses and worms. A few others mention identity theft and stealing of e-mail addresses to send spam to others.

The most common challenge mentioned is the volume of e-mail that one receives and has to manage. Complaints by several participants address slowness, the impersonal nature of e-mail, and how easy it is to misinterpret meaning. Other bothersome aspects include the irretrievability of e-mail, especially when one mistakenly pushes the wrong button.

Alternative Electronic Communications

We asked questions about the use of alternative electronic communications including IM, text, and social networking sites (SNSs). Here there are some differences among the age groups.

IM. Of the eleven people who said they IM often, one is in her 20s, one is in his 30s, two females are in their 40s, five are in their 50s (3 men, 2 women), and two women are in their 70s.

All of the 20-29s IM, but only one IMs often; the other five IM, but not often. On the other hand, over 60% (5 out of 8) of the 50-59s and 50% (2 out of 4) of the 70-79s

report that they IM often. The data show that people of all ages IM; it is not used by the young only.

Text. For ease of understanding, two tables were created to display data for each of the following alternative electronic communications. One table is sorted to show the frequency of use of that format of e-communication and the other table is sorted by age.

Of the ten who said they text often, three are in their 20s, two are in their 30s, four are in their 40s, and one is in her 50s. (See Table 2.)

Table 2

Text Use Sorted by Frequency

Age	Use of Text	Frequency
40s	No use	3
50s	No use	3
60s	No use	8
70s	No use	2
80s	No use	3
20s	Not often	3
30s	Not often	1
50s	Not often	4
70s	Not often	2
20s	Often	3
30s	Often	2
40s	Often	4
50s	Often	1

All of the 20-29 year olds *text*, half of them often and half not so often. All of the 30-39 year olds *text*, two often, and one not so often. More than half of those in their 40s *text* often. The other 40s don't use it at all. Only one 50-59 year old *texts* often, four don't *text* often, and two don't *text*. Of the 60-80 year olds, only two report that they *text* rarely, the others don't *text* at all. The data indicate that young people tend to *text* more frequently than the older population. (See Table 3.)

Table 3

Text Use Sorted by Age

Age	Use of Text	Frequency
20s	Often	3
20s	Not often	3
30s	Often	2
30s	Not often	1
40s	Often	4
40s	No use	3
50s	Often	1
50s	Not often	4
50s	No use	3
60s	No use	8
70s	Not often	2
70s	No use	2
80s	No use	3

Table 4

Frequency of Use of Social Networking Sites

Age	Use of SNSs	Frequency
30s	No use	2
40s	No use	6
50s	No use	4
60s	No use	8
70s	No use	2
80s	No use	3
20s	Facebook	6
30s	Facebook	1
40s	Facebook	1
50s	Facebook	3
70s	Facebook	1
20s	Other SNS	6
50s	Other SNS	4
70s	Other SNS	1

Social Networking Sites (SNSs). Fourteen individuals reported that they use social networking; of them, two use it rarely. Facebook is the most popular of the social networking sites; 12 have accounts there. (See Table 4.)

All of the six individuals in their 20s have Facebook accounts; most of them have SNS accounts on more than one site. One in his 30s and one in her 40s have Facebook accounts. Four in their 50s have accounts on SNSs; one with more than one account. Two in their 70s have SNS accounts. None of the 60-somethings or 80-somethings have SNS accounts. (See Table 5.)

Table 5.

Use of Social Networking Sites Sorted by Age

Age	Use of SNSs	Frequency
20s	Facebook	6
20s	Other SNS	6
30s	No use	2
30s	Facebook	1
40s	No use	6
40s	Facebook	1
50s	No use	3
50s	Facebook	2
50s	Other SNS	4
60s	No use	8
70s	No use	1
70s	Facebook	1
70s	Other SNS	1
80s	No use	3

Discussion and Conclusions

E-mail Use Across Age Groups

Contrary to the literature review above that indicates an age difference in e-mail habits between young people and older folks, the data we collected did not reveal any

noteworthy relationships. The majority of those surveyed have used e-mail for more than 10 years, even those in their 20s.

This survey did not reveal that e-mail is used mainly for business. The data show that e-mail is used at least as much for socializing. Participants also reported that they used e-mail for finding and sharing information and for shopping. One participant in her 20s reported that she *texts* everyday, all day long to friends and for work. She commented, "work is more for e-mail." This is in line with previous research that indicated that e-mail is more for business (Fitzpatrick, 2007).

It seems that one formula for enjoying a trouble-free e-mail existence is having offspring, a spouse, or someone who can help when technological problems arise. When asked about annoyances and frustrations, one woman declared "I am not computer savvy; my husband sets me up and I just use it, so I don't have to deal." Another woman said, "Sometimes I call my son in Texas. He tells me to push this or that." Another participant told a story wherein her son-in-law became annoyed at the use/abuse of his computer expertise and at one point refused further aid to his mother-in-law. The result of this was several months of no e-mail for an avid 79 year old e-mail user.

Of interest is the phenomenon that e-mail and *texting* can be almost the same, depending on the way it is accessed. A participant who has a Blackberry notes that both text messages and e-mail messages appear on her phone. She states that, "text messaging or e-mail is the same process on my Blackberry." The Blackberry blurs the differences among various electronic communicators. Two participants in our survey are known Blackberry users.

Alternative electronic communication

In reviewing the data on the use of IM, text messaging, and SNSs, we find no differences among age groups for IMing, but there are some differences among age groups for *texting* and SNSs. The data show that people of all ages IM; it is not used by the young only. It also appears that gender is not a factor in IM use.

In reviewing the data on the use of *texting*, the data indicate that young people tend to *text* more frequently than the older population. It also appears that gender is not a factor in text use. A few people mentioned that the high cost of *texting* deters their use. One participant in her 20s commented that “*texting* is not in my phone plan, but it’s cheaper to *text* than going over minutes.” If an individual has a flat rate for phone and/or *texting*, its use could increase.

SNSs seem to be popular with those in their 20s. Use is sporadic for other age groups except those in their 50s. A question arises: Are those in the 50-59 age group the parents of 20-29 year olds? Are they active SNS users because they are interested in what their children are doing?

Patterns of electronic communication are susceptible to rapid change due to the advent of new technology, access to technology, and social and economic pressures. While the 20-29 year olds were in college, they reported heavy use of Facebook. Since graduation, this use has declined. One in this age group said that she used Facebook in college everyday. Now her friends don’t use it much anymore. Another said that she started near the beginning – in 2004. “In the beginning only good liberal arts colleges had Facebook. When I got on there were only about 30 colleges. I never quit. Every once in

awhile I get on – maybe once a month.” Use of SNSs seems very dependent on one’s social contacts. An individual seems to use a SNS if one’s social contacts use SNSs.

Lorenz (2007) suggests that e-mail is suited for messages that give the writer time to think about what and how things should be stated. It provides a record of conversations that some find comforting (and others find unnerving). A participant shared, “on e-mail I can correspond or respond at leisure, I can change my mind, and I can perfect my message.”

In conclusion, our study revealed no significant differences among adult age groups in their use of e-mail. Although the popular literature claims that young people feel that e-mail is for old fogeys and for business (Fitzpatrick, 2007), the data did not support this claim. Although Werbach (2002) cautioned that e-mail might disappear because of a preponderance of spam, participants in the present study continue to use e-mail despite their concerns and frustrations about e-mail abuse, especially with spam and identity theft.

The data suggest a divergence in the use of alternative electronic communications, particularly in the use of *texting* and in the use of SNSs. The data indicate that young people may prefer to use *texting* and social networking more than their older counterparts. Although we probed email use and preferences, our findings prompt the need for further investigation that focuses on alternative electronic communication across age groups.

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