

A Study Comparing the Psychological Impact of Sending and Receiving Letters v. Emails

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Introduction

In business we communicate daily using many forms of connection with our colleagues, clients or customers. The majority of communication happens through electronic voice or mail networks, especially since the introduction of mobile reception and transmission devices that can handle continuous streams of sound, text, and image information.

The use of email has risen exponentially since its inception in the 1970s. It has been estimated that worldwide, well over 50,000 emails are sent every year to each active account, 80% of which is spam! The average office worker receives 80 emails daily, despatching 35. This means that most of us are receiving at least one email message every 5 minutes while at work.¹ Some people, like Bill Gates receive considerably more!²

Global computerisation has promoted this growth in email traffic, where emails have become in some instances little more than electronic 'post-it' notes to introduce accompanying attachments of documents, images, music or video files (or URL addresses). We now use email daily, without giving it much thought, where it has become a mundane, automatic habit. We enter the office, switch on the computer and open the email like clockwork. Checking the email account has become a modern obsession along with checking for messages on the mobile and 'texting'. People are no longer where they physically are nor with the person they are physically with; their 'psychological self' is 'out there' in cyberspace at the other end of a smartphone, BlackBerry or iPhone connection.

Present Study

A small scale study was designed by Psychologists at London Metropolitan University on behalf of Avery Office and Consumer Products. The research was designed to assess the

¹ Michael Stephens, (2012). Volume of email reaching a tipping point.
http://www.smeweb.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=3319:volume-of-email-reaching-tipping-point&catid=64:features&Itemid=102

² Microsoft founder Bill Gates receives four million emails per year, (BBC News, November, 2008)
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/4023667.stm>

impact on the receiver of getting a message either via email or by hand delivered letter. The message that participants received was exactly the same, sent from the address of an identical company – it was only the form the message took (email or letter) that differed.

40 participants (males and females whose ages ranged from 23-52) who were employed and had a role in ordering their offices' stationery were recruited. 20 of these were randomly assigned to the 'email' message condition and the other 20 assigned to the 'letter' message condition. Upon receipt and reading of the message each participant was asked to complete an attitude feedback questionnaire. This questionnaire asked about a number of issues:

1. How the recipient felt about the sender of the message.
2. How the recipient felt about the message itself.
3. How the recipient judged the message to make them feel about themselves.

Recipients were also asked to rate:

1. How likely they were to engage with the company that sent the message.
2. How much the message conveyed a positive impression of the company.
3. How much the message medium conveyed a positive impression of the message content.

Lastly a focus group was conducted with 8 random participants from the 40 about their attitudes to email and letter-based communication.

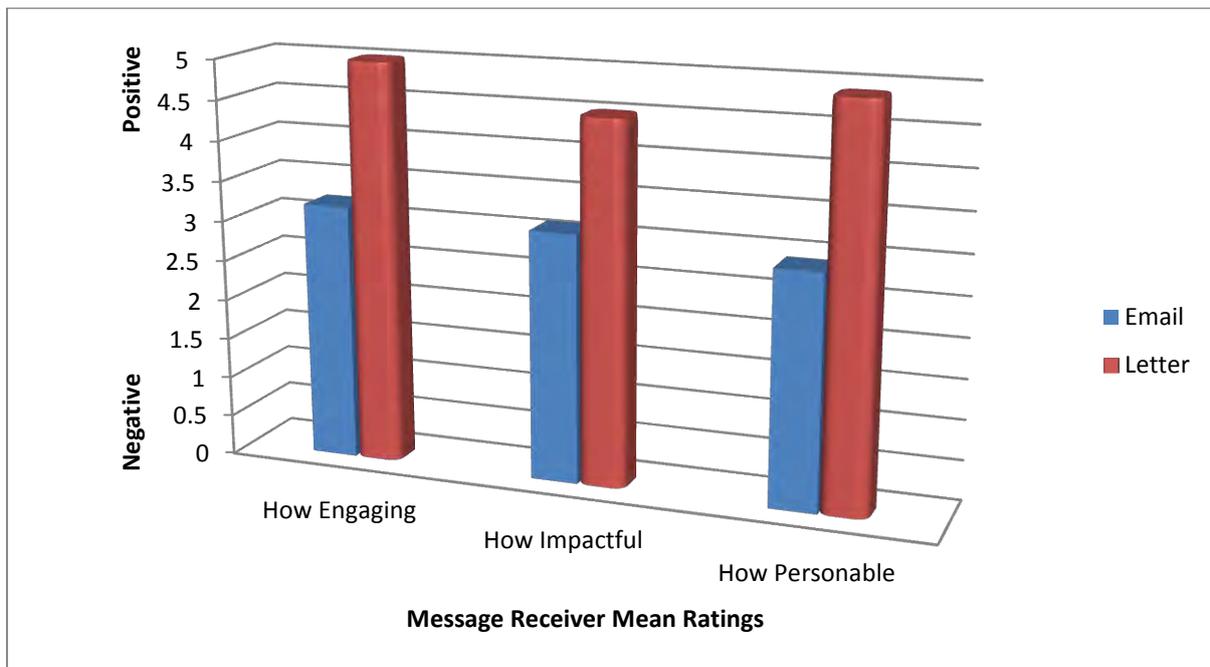
Findings

All attitude responses were explored via appropriate statistical analysis to ensure interpretative impartiality.

Printed words are more cognitively engaging than electronic ones!

Emails are like short notes, containing the main points of the message and little else. They are usually composed in a hurry, and usually convey that 'in-a-hurry' message. Emails skim the surface of issues and any additional details are contained in attachments or pointed-to in outside references. Communication via email rarely transcends this 'note-exchange' process and rarely develops into becoming a proper conversation between people where more complex facets of exchange are explored. Research also suggests that words read on paper are more engaging than those read electronically. Some scientists worry that the fractured experience typical of the internet could rob developing readers of crucial skills. Associate Professor Ken Pugh, a cognitive neuroscientist at Yale has suggested that reading a book (or a letter for example), and taking the time to reflect and make inferences and engage the imaginal processing "is more cognitively enriching, without doubt, than the short little bits that you might get if you're into the 30-second digital mode".

This was certainly the case in the opinion of the participants in the present study. There was a statistically significant difference in that receivers of the letter rated it as being more engaging than those who received the same message electronically via email. On ratings of message impact – the email version was significantly rated as having less of an impact than the letter version. These dimensions could have impacted on how personable the message was perceived by the receiver – with the letter version again coming out on top in this regard versus the email version.



“I tend to scan emails pretty quickly as I’m not all that keen on reading too much on the computer screen”, Ben an Administrator from South London stated.

Sally, an Office Manager from Highbury, London, said: *“At least with a letter you can be more discreet when reading it – when you are in an open plan office anyone can look over your shoulder and read your open email!”*

“I tend to concentrate more on reading printed material or hand written stuff – emails I’ve just got into the habit of scanning and getting the overall gist”, said a slightly embarrassed Jason, from South London.

Clients label emails as less likely to be read than letters

Because of their speed and convenience, nowadays most people communicate predominantly by email. Requesting an address usually means an email version and not a postal address is offered as a secure and reliable way of establishing initial contact between people and their organisations. It is the method most people employ to send out a quick message to lots of people though, as a consequence, it can often be rated as spam and not read properly or indeed at all. The present study supported this finding, with only 15% of

the participants stating they would definitely read through all of their emails carefully, while 85% said they would definitely read letters more carefully. Interestingly a whopping 95% of the participants rated letters as being 'more real' and 80% of them thought letters offered a better chance of persuading someone of something.

This theme emerged from the focus group conversations as well.

Emails are not very personable are they? I mean how many emails do you get in a day and how many letters? That's probably why receiving a letter will make you sit up and pay immediate attention", reflected Joel, an office worker from Lincoln.

Shara, a PA for a legal firm in central London, said: *"It's funny really but any letter I receive I immediately think has been sent by a real person – in comparison half the emails I receive I simply wonder if they've been artificially generated by a programme!"*

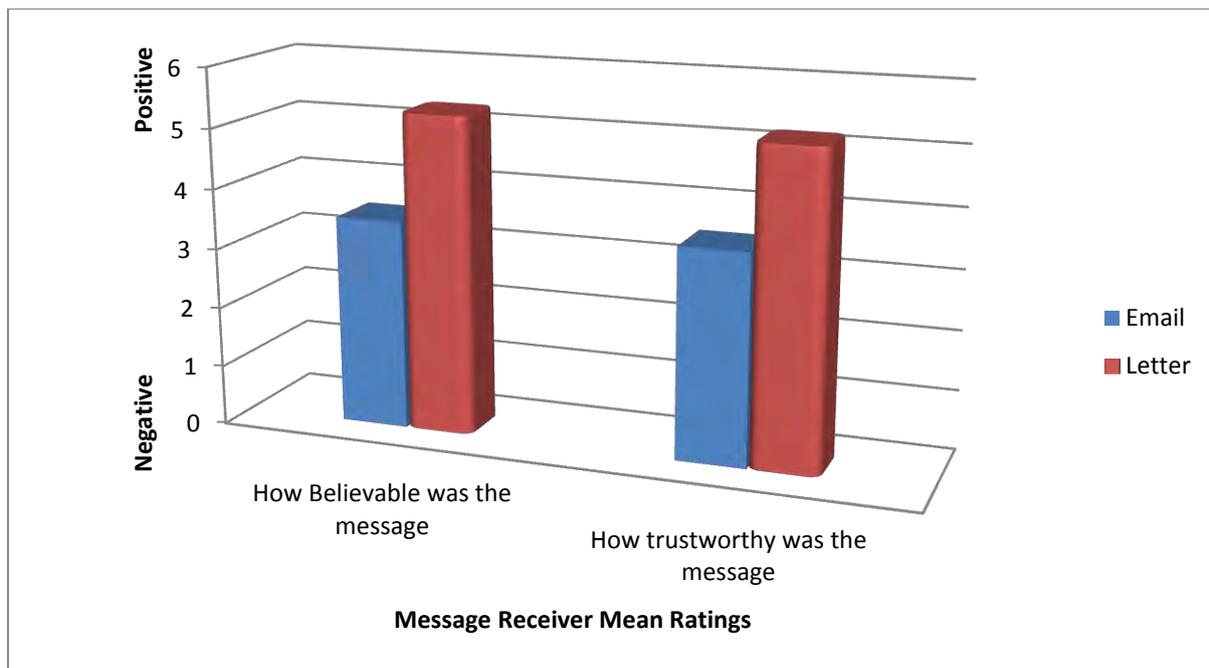
"If I'm honest I've probably got emails from months back that are sitting unopened in my inbox. I can't say that ever happens when I get a letter", said Sally from Highbury, London.

People believe letters are more honest than emails

People will lie in any medium, but compared with pen-and-paper, they lie more over email and feel that lying is more justified. In Naquin et al.'s (2010) study, participants lied 50% more when they negotiated over email compared with pen-and-paper. There are three psychological explanations for this perception:

1. Emails are less permanent: they feel more like 'chatting' than writing a letter does.
2. Less restrained: people feel freer online because of the online disinhibition effect, a loosening or complete abandonment of social restrictions and inhibitions that are present in normal face-to-face interactions.
3. Lower personal connection: over email we feel psychologically distant, resulting in low trust and rapport and less responsibility.

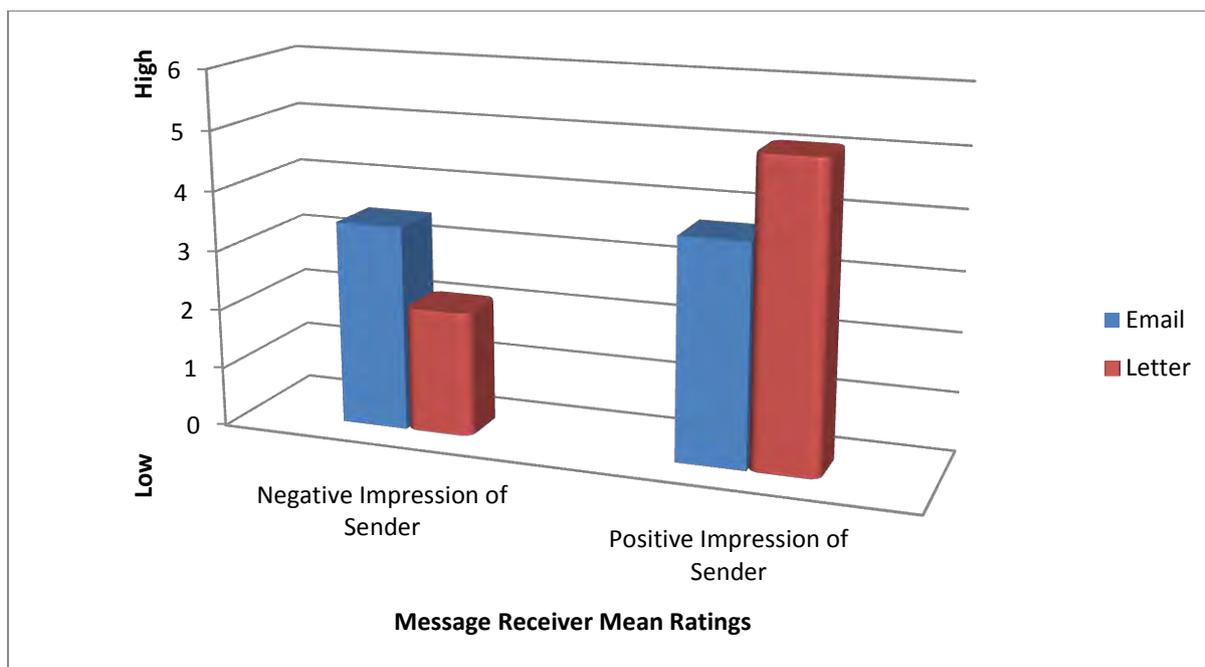
This effect was also evident in the present study with those participants who received the email communication rating it significantly less believable and trustworthy than those who received it in printed letter form.



We judge email writers more negatively than letter writers!

Psychological research has shown that people tend to be more negative when using email communications. For example, Kurtzberg et al. (2005) found that when people evaluated each other in performance appraisals using both pen-and-paper and email, they were consistently more negative about their colleagues when using email. "The anonymity of e-mail leads to rudeness," says Susan Barnes, a Professor of Communication at Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. Barnes adds that email means we may not feel accountable, especially if we've never actually spoken to the other person.

The present study uncovered a similar effect. When asked about their impression of who had sent the message (in terms of attributes like how warm, likeable, intelligent, incompetent, lazy and unimportant they judged the sender to be) the letter receivers rated themselves as having a more positive impression of the message sender than those who got the same message via email.



It would seem then psychologically that letters are seen as more trustworthy, reliable and set themselves against such implicit messages associated with more ‘instant’ forms of messaging: “I am lazy”, “I am too busy””I have no time for you!”

Letters make us feel good!

The information contained in a letter is to be found in more than the words alone. There are a number of important non-verbal cues, which subconsciously affect the perception and evaluation of the letter and the letter-writer. A letter is a ‘personalised’ message. It brings the writer ‘closer’ to the recipient in ways that other forms of communication cannot.

One of the initial cues comes from the style of the letter and the quality of the envelope, labels and paper on which it is written. Opening the envelope is like tearing into Christmas gift wrap. Some do it neatly, and reservedly fold the paper respectfully to retain every memory; some rip and rend the wrapping to tatters, and relish in the mad liberation of a coveted prize.

This perception was something that emerged from the focus group too.

“There is just something much more exciting and engaging about opening a letter than an email”, remarked Sally, an Office Manager from Highbury, London.

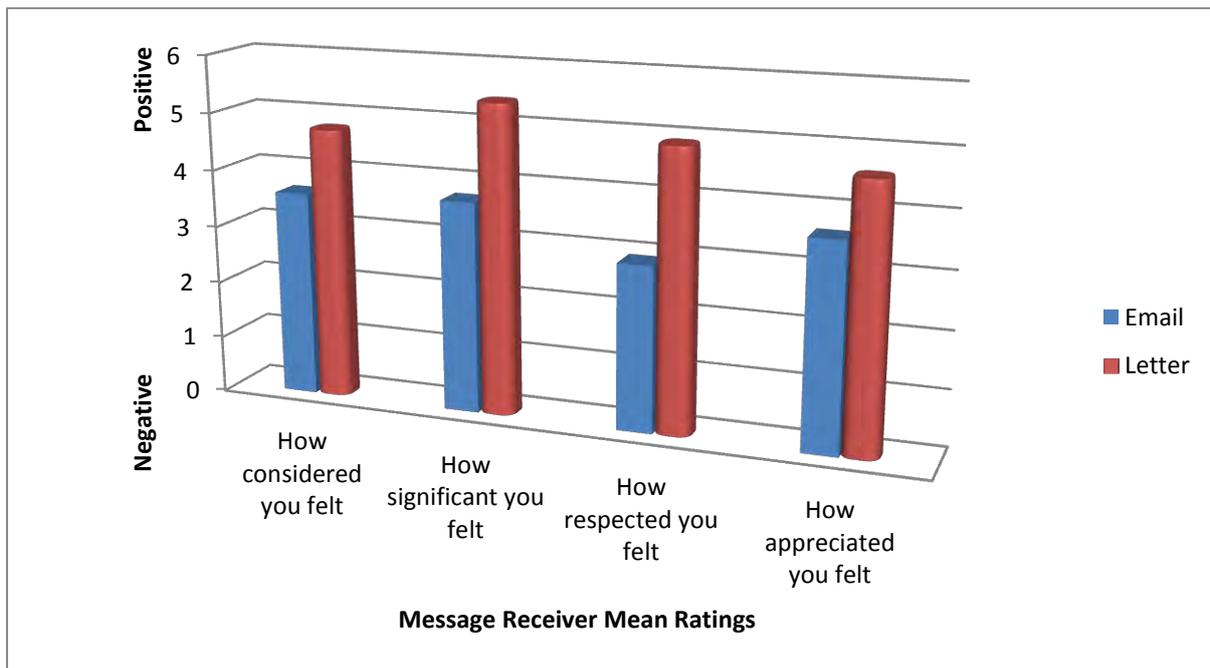
“Receiving a letter in a posh envelope with a nice address label and opening it in anticipation is certainly more exciting than clicking on a virtual folder”, said Joel, an office worker from Lincoln.

“Emails are cheap and easy to access. Letters you have to work at opening and unfolding and as such you pay more attention – you’ve invested more”, stated Jason, an Administrator from South London.

Even the subtle use of scent can be useful here; this need not be just rose perfume! A smell of coffee, or chocolate or printer's ink can convey a subtle subconscious positive message – something that the one dimensional aspects of email lacks.³

The letter also transmits other implicit messages that suggest the sender cares about both the message and the recipient. A letter shows the sender has invested effort in constructing the message, willing to spend time on the recipient receiving the letter.

This effect seemed evident in the present research study. The receivers of the message via the letter condition rated themselves to be significantly more positive in how the message had made them feel about themselves than those people who received it via email.



The email process becomes humdrum: “Type, Read, Send, Delete, File, Trash, Next!”. There is no longer any enjoyment, which is still available in letter writing and receiving.

Finally and sadly, there is the increasing problem of overload and stress in relation to email. The volume and nature of email communication overextends workers both physically and mentally; longer hours are being worked to deal with the number of messages. The immediacy of the process and the perceived demand for instant responses is also leading to a number of psychological stress symptoms.

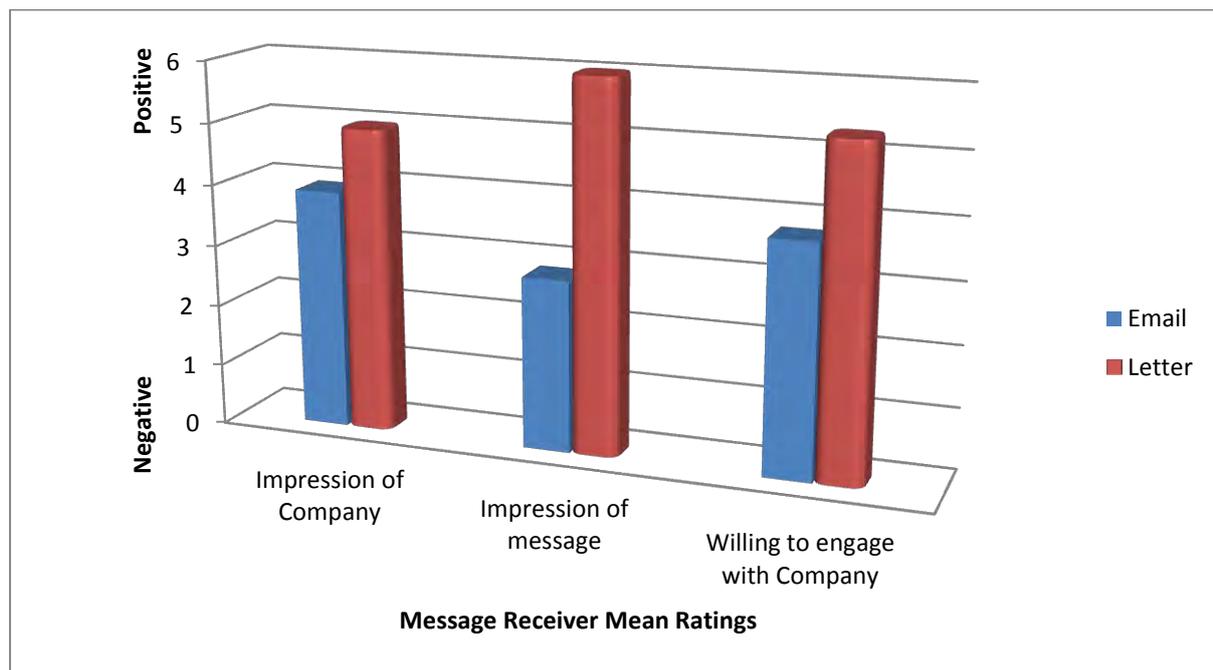
Overall impression of the company that sent the message

There were statistically significant differences between the email and the letter groups in how they perceived the company that sent the message and their subsequent willingness to

³ Bradford, K. D. & Desrochers, D. M. (2009). The Use of Scents to Influence Consumers: The Sense of Using Scents to Make Cents.
http://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/7171/1/Desrochers-Scent_revision_Jan_30.pdf

engage with that company. Again, this is particularly interesting given the message content was exactly the same and it was only the message medium that was different.

As can be seen from the graph below, the participants who received the message in letter form not only rated the message to have had a greater positive impression on them but also showed a more positive regard to the company that sent the message, demonstrating a greater likelihood of subsequently engaging with the company in the future. This highlights the differential effects that the 'medium' of communication can play in our interactions with others.



This impression was also evident in the focus group discussions.

Ben, an Administrator from South London, revealed: *“Anyone can send an email – you can even cut and paste the same message or copy lots of other people into the same message. To me that doesn’t suggest that a company is really interested in me as an individual”*,

“I haven’t had a letter in ages – to see my name printed on a nice envelope felt quite special. It immediately made me feel that whoever had sent this spent some time personalising it just for me”, said Michaela, a PA from Cambridge.

This was a similar impression that Claire, an Office Worker from Central London had: *“The fact that they had spent time printing out the message, writing out my name and address and posting it to me suggested to me that I was important to them. It gave me a nice feeling about the company”*.

Conclusion

The present study demonstrated the positive effects of receiving a message via a letter as compared to getting it via email. It highlighted that letters have an important role in the commercial world and can bring unique and positive benefits to companies that use them at the right times. The fact that receiving a letter can have positive effects on our self-attitude should also not be underestimated.

We should not see the choice of letter writing v. email as some 'either-or' dichotomy. Rather, there are opportunities and risks contained within both forms of communication, and the choice of medium should be carefully considered depending upon the circumstances. There are moments when immediacy, speed and convenience would suggest email is the best way to communicate. However, in the context of wanting to engage another's attention, explain a complex matter in detail, convey positive or negative arguments, persuade or motivate and express an emotion clearly, then a letter seems to be the preferred method of getting the message across.

References:

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