

*Article*

## **Email as a Data Collection Tool when Interviewing Older Adults**

Mario A. Brondani, DDS, MSc, PhD  
Assistant Professor  
Faculty of Dentistry  
University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada

Michael I. MacEntee, LDS(I), Dip. Prosth., FRCD(C), PhD  
Professor  
Faculty of Dentistry  
University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada

Deborah O'Connor, PhD, RSW  
Professor  
School of Social Work  
University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, Canada

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### **Abstract**

This article explores several aspects of electronic communication, specifically its advantages and disadvantages within the context of a brief experience using email to interview elders. Two older adults participated via email as the psychosocial impact of aging was collected using such venue. Our experiences are compared with published reports from others to analyze the benefits and limitations of email as a research tool. The email was spontaneous, comprehensive, interactive, efficient, confidential, and cost effective. The use of email within this exploratory study appeared to be an effective approach to collecting qualitative information about beliefs and behaviours from older adults who feel comfortable with this form of communication. The lack of similar studies limited the scope of discussion and comparison of findings; generalization is limited due to the small sample size. This investigation, however, suggested that the use of email as an interview tool may be considered in today's exploratory research arena as an alternative to conference calls or face-to-face interviews when time is a constraint.

**Key words:** Canada, communication, data collection, electronic mail, email, interviews, older adults

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## Background

Electronic communication as the exchange of *meanings* between individuals via a common system of symbols has experienced a dramatic boom for the past two decades, not only in terms of developmental technology, but also in terms of global presence (Charness, Parks, & Sabel, 2001). Computer-assisted data collection as a research tool facilitated by the Internet is used widely in healthcare and sociology (de Leeuw & Nicholls, 1996) to portray personal insights (Mann & Stewart, 2003). The Internet has experienced exponential growth as part of commerce and business (Simeon, 1999; Whyte & Marlow, 1999), politics (Plouffe, 2009) and as a venue for both public and individual health promotion messages (Scanfield, Scanfield, & Larson, 2010; Wong, Greenwell, Gates, & Berkowitz, 2008) to the extent that more than one billion people currently use the Internet (IT Facts, 2008). This boom has prompted some researchers to refer to the Internet as a cultural entity on its own (Constantinides, Lorenzo-Romero, & Gomez, 2010; Burkhalter, 1999). The Internet may, for example, be used as ‘therapeutic’ by and for older adults (Melenhorst & Bouwhuis, 2004), and may provide support for caregivers of people with Alzheimer’s disease (Alzheimer Society of Canada, 2009).

Associated with the Internet, the use of electronic mail (email) has increased dramatically as an effective tool of communication over the pen and paper format (Meho, 2006). Its popularity as a research tool has also increased and there is growing interest in assessing its effectiveness as such (Ferreira, 1996; Selwyn & Robson, 1998; Benfield, 2000). As a research tool, email is a well-established means of distributing questionnaires (Mann & Stewart, 2003; Meho, 2006) and interviewing people about their values and opinions (Selwyn & Robson, 1998; Flowers & Moore, 2003). Nonetheless, it has been criticised as abstract, impersonal, and insensitive to the nuances of non-verbal behaviours, rapport and relationships (Melenhorst & Bouwhuis, 2004), and it is seen by many as a medium more appropriate to youth than to old age (McAuliffe, 2003). Given that few studies have been published on the topic (Hage, 2008; Marx, Libin, Renaudat, & Cohen-Mansfield, 2002) and that (self) stereotypes of older adults’ technological competence still exist (Harwood, 2007), questions about the value of email as a sensitive and useful medium for interviewing older adults about their personal values and opinions are timely (Freese, Rivas, & Hargittai, 2006).

Exchange of information through email requires a level of computer literacy that will enable participants to use the medium (Mann & Stewart, 2003; Etter & Perneger, 2001). The precipitous increase in the use of computers and email has done much to develop this literacy in all segments of society, and electronic jargon is used widely throughout television, radio, newspapers and text messaging via cellular phones. Moreover, the cost of computers has steadily decreased (Statistics Canada, 2002) and software programs have become more accessible for use by the general public. Furthermore, the cost of accessing the Internet is not a major financial barrier to most households and free access is available in many public spaces such as coffee shops. As a result, the profile of the Internet users has changed. For example, while a predominance of users used to be Caucasian men between 35-49 years with higher than average incomes, there are now more Asian Pacific

females of the same age group using the Internet (IT Facts, 2008; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004). Furthermore, more than 10% of all Internet users in North America are people older than 60 years-of-age who own personal computers; this group is now online daily more than any other age group (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004, EMarketer, 2010)).

Nonetheless, there is a general assumption that older people are neither computer literate nor familiar with email (Harwood, 2007; Whyte & Marlow, 1999), and that they are disinterested in the Internet (Silver, 2001). Consequently electronic sampling for research on the use of computers can be biased towards younger and relatively affluent segments of the population (Flowers & Moore, 2003). However, these assumptions have been questioned (Harwood, 2007; McConatha, McConatha, & Dermigny, 1994). According to an email survey (Johnson & MacFadden, 1997), 70% of the seniors who use the Internet claim to have intermediate computer skills, 60% use the Internet to keep their minds active, and more than 50% send and read emails regularly. Similar results were recently found by Freese et al. (2006), whereas others have pointed out that some older adults might consider email to be impersonal (Melenhorst & Bouwhuis, 2004). Nonetheless, there is increased use of the Internet among people aged over 65 years in Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000), Canada (Statistics Canada, 2010), and the USA (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004), possibly because of more leisure time and discretionary income to spend on computers (Madden, 2010). In fact, someone who is 65 years-old today has witnessed the dramatic growth of the World Wide Web and the introduction of electronic social networks over the past 10 years (Harwood, 2007; Ramsay, 2010). There has been an increasing number of websites offering a plethora of resources for seniors including step-by-step glossaries (National Institutes of Health, n.d.), blogs, chatrooms, e-learning opportunities (<http://www.seniornet.org/>), and dating websites ([www.50plus-club.ca/Dating](http://www.50plus-club.ca/Dating)). Hence, many of the today's Western older adults who have approached retirement age are likely to have worked with, or been exposed to an online environment either at the workplace, at home, or in both locations. As Harwood (2007) has discussed, these individuals may feel comfortable with email for interview purposes.

### **Objectives and Design**

Within a qualitative pilot study of feelings and experiences associated with aging, designed originally for face-to-face interviews with eight subjects over 65 years of age, we encountered an Italian-speaking man and a Portuguese-speaking woman who offered to participate only if we would communicate with them solely by email,<sup>1</sup> a venue suggested by Harwood (2007) and Melenhorst and Bouwhuis (2004) and indeed used by more than 50% of the older adult population (Madden, 2010). Both participants informed us independently that they were enthusiastic about the study but that they did not have time to meet directly for an interview. Consequently, we agreed to their request, and, after one face-to-face meeting to obtain signatures indicating informed consent, we proceeded to communicate electronically with the two participants. We draw from the literature on topics of aging and electronic communication as we illustrate our exploratory experience using email to interview older adults. This manuscript was part of a class project coordinated by the third author (DO) that was undertaken by the first author (MAB) while under his PhD program (supervised by MIM). Ethical approval was obtained by the University of British Columbia's Office of Research Services.

## **Email Communications with Older Participants**

### **Delayed Responses and Absence of Punctuation**

Information was exchanged in a 'question and answer format.' Although there was no mandatory deadline for a reply or response, we requested a maximum of 72 hours, which is suggested in the literature as sufficient time for thoughtful reflection and response (Meho, 2006; McAuliffe, 2003).

Punctuation is generally regarded as either a representation of a spoken word to convey intonation, duration or stress, or an integral part of the syntax. A notable observation throughout our electronic communications with both participants was the irregular and random absence of grammatical punctuation:

I do remember back in time how difficult it was for my grandparents to have the comfortable life that I have now I know we are living in different periods of time, but it is not fair because I cannot compare today with 50 years ago in another country where it was even more difficult.

The absence of grammatical pauses is not uncommon online with instant messenger and text services, particularly commas and full-stops when space is limited or cost per text is an issue. Even though such apparent freedom in punctuation rules can confuse the meaning of a sentence, the informality and ease of interactions make it relatively easy to seek clarification when needed (Flowers & Moore, 2003; Meho, 2006). More often than not punctuation is avoided at best, or misplaced at worst in transcribed texts from regular face-to-face interactions to the extent that statistical methods have been proposed to assert that the text is correctly punctuated (O'Kane et al., 1994). Either way, it remains at the interpretation of the individual analysing the transcripts to make sense of sentences or excerpts given the context in which they occur.

### **Confidentiality**

Electronic files are notoriously insecure, which poses a challenge to the confidentiality of our research responses, especially when computers are connected to a local network (Etter & Perneger, 2001; Cohen, 2001). To overcome this problem, we used a password-protected file in our electronic mailbox to store communication from our participants. In fact, Reisenwitz, Iyer, Kuhlmeier, and Eastman (2007) and Harwood (2007) have identified security and safety concerns as perceived barriers, which may further reduce older adults' computer use.

### **Indirect Contact and Body Language**

There is a standardized on-line conversational behaviour called "Netiquette" among some Internet users that substitutes paralinguistic cues and non-linguistic body language with specific symbols to express feelings. For example: "🙂" indicates a happy face; "😉" indicates a wink; and "lol" indicates a laugh-out-loud (Selwyn & Robson, 1998; Shea, 2004; King, 1996; McAuliffe, 2003). Our two participants seemed comfortable with the focus of our enquiries, and, with no hint of distress or difficulty, occasionally used the symbols to embellish their stories. Apparently we had an easy, trusting and friendly relationship as evidenced by the informality and general tone of our exchanges. This ease in online communication has also been documented by others (Melenhorst & Bouwhuis, 2004; Reisenwitz et al., 2007). In our brief experience, the male responded to a request for more information by writing:

Again?! Don't get me wrong but I think that what you are asking in this question I already answered before am I right? Well, or maybe I did not fully answer at that time. I can try again if you like ; )  
[the symbolic wink indicates emotional approval of the offer].

Despite the availability of symbols to express emotions and compensate for the lack of visible body language, email continues to pose limitations on the detection and interpretation of emotions (Haythornthwaite, 2000). High resolution web-cameras with voice and video capabilities would probably help to overcome these limitations, but they were not available to use for our study. In addition, it can be difficult for interviewers to acquire the skills needed to probe for responses when the emotional environment of direct human contact is missing (Flowers & Moore, 2003).

### **Validation**

The validation of qualitative data obtained by face-to-face interviews usually occurs while probing the participants during the interview, or later, through member checks (Creswell, 2007). Since the same validation must happen for electronic interviewing, the informality of the interactions offered us the opportunity to validate and enhance the trustworthiness of data analysis as communications continued (Meho, 2006). For example, when one participant wrote that he felt "behind" his age, we interpreted this to mean that he felt younger than his chronological age. However, when we asked him to clarify that feeling he replied that he was renting an apartment, and that he felt somehow disadvantaged and financially "behind" his peers who owned "a piece of land... as a consequential acquisition after years of work." This interaction illustrates the benefits of being able to easily prompt participants to express further feelings, thoughts and perceptions, and it demonstrates rapport between interviewer and participant (Patton, 2002). Similar to any interaction, whether electronic or in-person, it may be difficult for some participants to respond adequately if the posed question is too short, ambiguous, or unnecessarily succinct (Flowers & Moore, 2003). Due to the informality of electronic communication, however, we easily provided clarification as needed (Meho, 2006).

### **Length of responses**

We experienced that responses by email were more succinct than the information we recorded during face-to-face interviews. The average email response from the two participants to the question "What aspects of your life do you consider important today?" consisted of 190 words, while the average response to this question during face-to-face interviews with the other six participants in the study was 580 words. However, when we compared the content of the emailed responses with the face-to-face responses, the essence of the feelings expressed was similar. For example, when asked a general question about aging, a face-to-face response was:

I can see different things as I age, as I get older, as a life-time passes through you. But you know, my fear of getting older as the time passes is, you know, when I look back and I see all...looking back to my grandparents, for example...and I see that, like, to become incapable and demented, psychologically affected, mentally distressed, you know. I cannot remember if they were like this, but this is what I feel...like being unable to do activities that I normally do. And you know, being unable and with no support, kind of alone, in the sense...even though I'm not like that at all, but there is the feeling... [Word count: 112].

Whereas an email was:

Free and with more experience. It is important to transmit to the next generation what my parents and grandparents conquered even if they experienced some problems. And I think of some frail people, incapable of living by themselves and alone in an asylum I cannot portray myself there I feel sorry for them. [Word count: 53].

Nonetheless, both participants expressed their feelings about frailty and anxiety when reflecting on their grandparents. In fact, the introduction of Twitter in 2006 as a social network has proven that length is not a problem in conveying precise and direct information using short messages of up to 140 characters each (Hackworth & Kunz, 2010).

### **Informality**

Email provides a context for a non-coercive and anti-hierarchical dialogue to promote equal opportunity and reciprocity, which constitutes an ideal situation free of internal or external intimidation (Creswell, 2007). From the beginning, the participants adopted informal language when greeting the interviewer. When asked about what a normal day looks like to them, they embellished their responses such as "... my day is really good (and I tell you... it is a way better than I thought it would be) ...", and "First, I have my cappuccino around 8:00 in the morning ... well, actually the coffee here is not as good as in the village where I used to live, but ...". These spontaneous embellishments provided information similar to that which might be provoked by proving questions asked in a face-to-face context (Patton, 2002).

### **Sampling possibilities and Cost-benefits**

E-communication opens the possibility of sampling on a very large scale globally with relatively low administrative costs (Selwyn & Robson, 1998; Harwood, 2007; Hackworth & Kunz, 2010) and, in our situation, it provided two additional participants for our study. It potentially mitigates conventional constraints of spatial and temporal proximity between interviewer and subject, and offers the possibility of a relatively unobtrusive and communicative environment. There is less concern for social hierarchy, and it may decrease the uneasiness caused by a dominant interviewer confronting a shy respondent, or a young interviewer with an older subject (Selwyn & Robson, 1998; Etter & Perneger, 2001).

There are clear cost-benefits from e-interviews because they provide written information directly without the costs of transcribing oral interviews (Flowers & Moore, 2003). Furthermore, e-interviews eliminate the need for tape-recorders and audiotapes, and for specific times, places and travel arrangement, which are required when conducting face-to-face interviews. The small number of participants that we experienced and the lack of similar studies, however, limit discussion and comparison of findings.

### **Summary**

Our brief experience using email has demonstrated that this method may:

- eliminate the constraints of time and space;
- offer cost-benefits by eliminating the need for tape recorders, transcription machines, and transcripts;

- provide a non-coercive and anti-hierarchical dialogue enhancing equal opportunity and reciprocity;
- increase response rate;
- require password-protected computer files to assess the data in those cases when computers are part of a shared network.

### **Concluding our Experience**

There is no question that older adults are reaching out for e-communication and interactions online, and the use of email as a research tool can be of value. Although misspelling and the lack of punctuation sometimes confounded and delayed prompt interpretation of the responses, the use of emails as illustrated by this exploratory study was useful and effective when collecting information about beliefs and behaviours from two older adults who felt comfortable with this form of communication. The two participants seemed to enjoy this opportunity for communicating their feelings and beliefs about growing older, and, compared to those who participated in the face-to-face interviews, there was no evidence that the emailing participants were in anyway inhibited from freely expressing themselves. Although the use of email as an interview tool should be considered in today's research arena as an alternative to conference calls or phone interviews when time is a constraint, generalizability of these findings is limited due to the small sample size. We do not know, for example, how useful this tool would be for older adults who are not accustomed to this virtual environment. As a result, there is need for further study to support, refute or illuminate these findings.

### **Notes**

1. Quotations from the original emails in Italian or Portuguese are translations by the interviewer (MAB) who can communicate in all three languages. However, we acknowledge that biases might have been incorporated due to the lack of triangulation or auditing of the translated data.

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