

# **Communication Habits: Men, Women & the Media They Prefer**

by

**John R. Cap**

[jcap@u.washington.edu](mailto:jcap@u.washington.edu)

**Info 491: Research in Informatics  
June 6, 2004**

## **Abstract**

---

Communication is an essential element of life and people communicate through many different media. This study investigates communication patterns of men and women and which media each gender prefers to use. Many different communication media are available, yet there seems to be only speculation of gender-related preferences.

While studies have shown personal electronic communication is one of the biggest motivations for internet use, there is contradiction as to which gender uses electronic communication more. In this study, I administered 75 questionnaires to 34 men and 41 women. Participants were asked which communication media they preferred to use and why. There were definite preference differences between the men and women in my study. The most preferred communication medium among male participants was face-to-face while the most preferred among women was the cellular phone. The least preferred communication medium among men was US Mail and least preferred among women was instant messaging.

## **Authors Keywords**

---

Communication, gender, communication preference, communication differences, family.

## **Contribution & Benefit**

---

Results of my study may be of interest to companies that produce communication products. Specifically, marketing and development departments of companies could use my findings to recommend changes/enhancements to their products.

## Table of Contents

---

<b>Abstract</b> .....	2
<b>Overview &amp; Goals</b> .....	4
<b>Background</b> .....	5
<b>Implications</b> .....	6
<b>Research Design &amp; Methods</b> .....	6
<b>Research Population</b> .....	8
<b>Results</b> .....	9
<b>Discussion</b> .....	11
<b>Conclusion &amp; Future Work</b> .....	11
<b>Acknowledgments</b> .....	12
<b>References</b> .....	14
<b>Appendix A</b> .....	15
<b>Appendix B</b> .....	18
<b>Appendix C</b> .....	20

## Overview & Goals

---

Almost every person in their day-to-day lives communicates with family members through various media. Some of the most popular media used include cell phones, email, telephone, US mail, face-to-face, and instant messaging. It's quite likely that the communication medium chosen in a particular instance may simply be the easiest or most convenient medium at that particular moment. While convenience may be a primary reason for choosing a specific communication media at a specific time, I was interested in determining which communication medium is most preferred by men and women in general.

In this study I investigated which communication media is most preferred by men and women when corresponding with immediate and extended family. I focused my research on "family" for a couple of reasons: First, family communication is mainly casual and informal. Business related communication is bound to be much more formal and rigid. Due to the formality of business related communication, I believe a person's preference is not the primary factor when choosing the communication medium. Second, I chose communication with "family" to decrease complications in the research. It is easy enough for someone to describe who their family is. It is much more difficult to describe who your friends are. What one person might consider a "friend," another person might have classified as an "acquaintance." One must also try to determine if there is a distinction between close friends and distant friends. This brings up another difficult term, "closeness." For these reasons I centered my attention on immediate and extended family members.

Through the methods described below I collected information from my sample population on which communication medium each subject prefers and how often he/she uses each medium. With the data collected I will attempt to suggest possible gender differences in communication.

## Background

---

Communication is a topic that is frequently under investigation. From M. Caals to Susan Herring communication between men and women, through electronic versus non-electronic means has been of interest to researchers. However, there seems to be no final word on differences in communication between men and women. When considering electronic communication, general opinion though largely undocumented, is that men are more computer savvy than women. Would it follow then, that men are more likely to use electronic media when communicating? There is some contradictory research on this matter. Ray, Sormunen, and Harris (1999) showed in their study that women are in fact more comfortable with computers than men. Similarly, young people are also thought to be more versed in using computers. Grintner and Palen (2002) in particular showed that younger generations are more likely to use the instant messaging as a communication medium. As computers become more and more integrated with our lives, it will follow that computers will become more integrated with communication.

However, traditional means of communication are still in wide use. People still write letters to family. People still pick up the phone and call relatives. No one can say that they no longer use face-to-face communication. LaRose (no publication date) discovered in his research that women were likely to spend twice as much time on the phone as men. Cummings, Kraut, and Kiesler (2001) showed through their research that people perceived a higher level of closeness when communicating by telephone when compared to face-to-face communication and face-to-face communication offers a higher level of closeness than email.

Studies have measured levels of perceived closeness among friends, determined gender-related technological comfort level, and have tried to explain the differences in personal the telephone use of men and women. This still leaves an open door to the subject of preference. Tang (1999) attempts to explain differences in email usage between men and women, stating men use email as a means to and end. Women on the other hand might use email as a simple tool for establishing and maintaining relationships. Herring (1994) offers supporting finding in her paper, Gender differences in computer-mediated communication. She reports that women in general are often

intimidated by men in online communication forums. While offering related information to my research question, these studies neglect to provide a simple, generalizable conclusion of which communication medium is most preferred by each gender.

## **Implications**

---

The results of my study will be of particular interest to companies that produce communication products. Specifically, the marketing and development departments of these companies could use my findings to recommend changes or enhancements to their products.

Marketing teams might use my research results to target those people that prefer to use their method of communication. Similarly, marketing teams could also use the results of my study to improve advertisement to groups of people that don't prefer that communication medium. Likewise, development departments could also use my results to enhance their products to further appeal to those people that prefer that communication medium.

Furthermore, my finding will provide a firm foundation for future research along the same subject matter. Results of my study may be improved upon or added to in order to increase generalizability.

## **Research Design & Methods**

---

My research consists of a comparative, inductive, exploratory study. Comparative: I am comparing the differences in communication patterns among men and women. Inductive: I am investigating the social communication habits of men and women. While many preconceived conclusions may be drawn, I am not expecting nor am I speculating any specific outcome for this study. Exploratory: My study explores the differences in communication media preferences among men and women.

Through my questionnaires, I have collected several demographic variables/data. Each subject was asked to include his/her: age, gender, city, state, and occupation. Age and gender are two primary variables in my study. Due to the fact that I am focusing on

men and women ages 18 to 50 and that I am not prescreening my participants, it was necessary that each participant disclose their age and gender. I will not be contacting any participants after the questionnaire is completed, therefore all pertinent information must be gathered at the beginning. Any questionnaire that was filled out by persons outside of my age range was thrown out. While city, state and occupation are not directly related to the research, they may be of importance when trying to identify confounding variables.

Subjects were also asked how many times per month (on average) they communicate with family members through each of the media listed above. This is another critical variable in my research. Each question asked about a specific group of family member. Parents include natural, adoptive and step-parents (a total of all). Siblings are all brothers and sisters. Children include natural, adoptive and step-children. Subjects were allowed to choose N/A for any of these questions, which might account for such cases as when a subject has no children, grandparents, etc. This information will allow me to identify those communication media that are most used by my participants.

Subjects were asked to rank a list of communication media in order of preference. The list includes: cellular phones, telephones, email, instant messaging, US Mail (letter writing), face-to-face. I have made a distinction between cellular phone and telephone because there is a significant difference in the intended use of each. In addition to ranking these media, subjects were asked for a brief description of why they ordered the choices as they did. This information will be important when trying to explain which communication medium my participants most prefer in addition to the reasons for which they prefer that medium.

Data was collected through a questionnaire that each subject filled out. It took approximately seven minutes to fill out the questionnaire to completion. No personally identifiable information was collected on the questionnaire. In regards to the ranking portion of the questionnaire, any medium not ranked was given a ranking of 6 (least preferred) by default. In regards to the communication frequency questions, any blank answer was counted as zero.

## Research Population

---

Sample population group for this research is men and women, ages 18 to 50. I have chosen 18 as my lower limit for two reasons. This is the age in which young adults can realistically be living on their own. Additionally, this might encourage more communication with family members outside the home. Similarly, I have chosen 50 years of age for the top of my sample age. One reason for this is that as people get older, they are less likely to have living relatives. I also believe that as age increases, the propensity to use electronic communication decreases. My study includes data from 34 men and 41 women. This number and distribution of subjects will add to the generalizability of my research.

My sampling was done by random, on an availability basis. Questionnaires were distributed and filled out outside of the Issaquah Safeway store. I chose this location to distribute my questionnaires in order to provide a gender distribution as even as possible. I received a fairly even spread of men and women outside of the grocery store. Before I conducted my research, a Letter of Cooperation was obtained from Safeway management (available in the Appendix).

Each participant was able to view and read a consent form (available in Appendix C) along with the questionnaire. The consent form is informative only and does not require a signature, however participants were allowed to take a copy with them.

## Results

---

I collected 75 complete questionnaires. I have 34 male respondents ranging from age 18 – 49 and 41 female respondents ranging from ages 18 – 50. My data is separated into two sections, preference ranking for the six communication media and number of communications per month with family members via each communication media.

Table 1 & 2 shows how male and female respondents ranked the six communication media along with a median score for each one. The tables display each medium and the totals for each preference ranking.

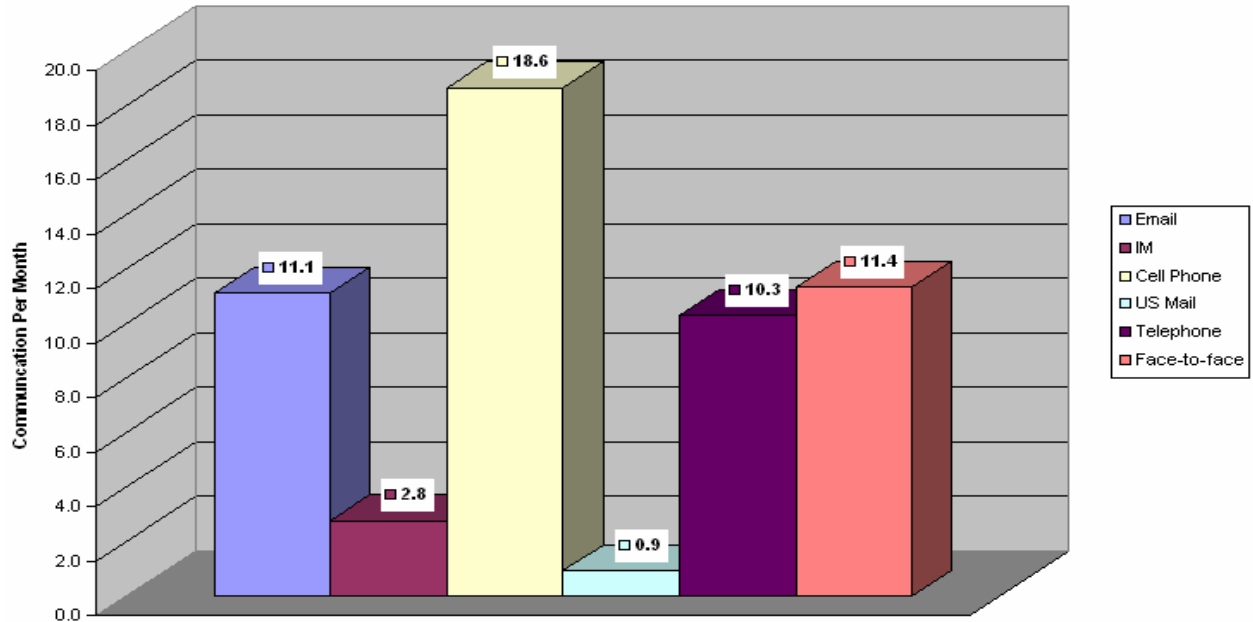
	Total Responses for Each Medium						Median Ranking
	1 (most preferred)	2	3	4	5	6 (least preferred)	
Face-to-Face	17	6	3	4	3	1	1.5
Cellular Phone	9	14	8	2	0	1	2.0
Email	3	7	13	9	2	0	3.0
Telephone	5	5	5	12	4	3	4.0
Instant Messenger	0	1	3	5	15	10	5.0
US Mail	0	1	2	2	13	16	6.0

Table 1: Medium Preferences for Male Participants Communicating With Family Members

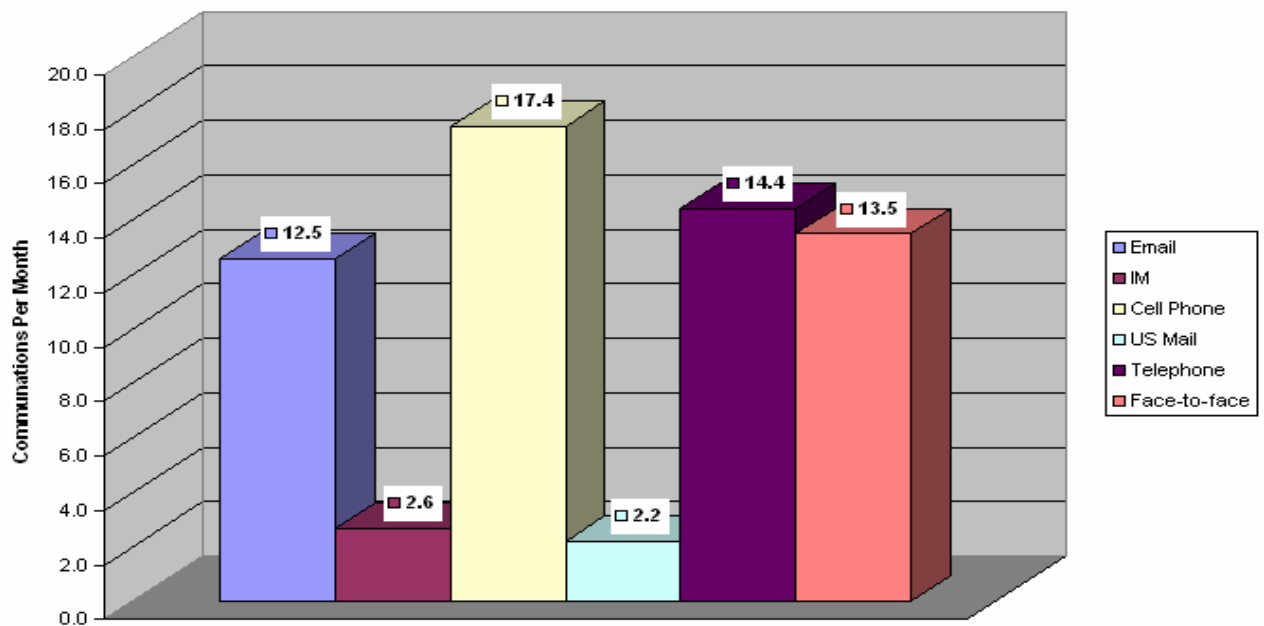
	Total Responses for Each Medium						Median Ranking
	1 (most preferred)	2	3	4	5	6 (least preferred)	
Cellular Phone	21	12	4	4	0	0	1.0
Face-to-Face	13	11	9	4	3	1	2.0
Telephone	3	11	10	10	4	3	3.0
Email	4	5	9	13	6	4	4.0
US Mail	0	1	3	7	13	17	5.0
Instant Messenger	0	2	5	4	12	18	5.0

Table 2: Medium Preferences for Female Participants Communicating With Family Members

Graph 1 & 2 shows each respondent's total number of communications per month with family members. There are two graphs, one for male participants and one for female participants. Each graph shows 6 bars, one for each communication medium.



**Graph 1: Average Number of Communication/Month for Male Participants**



**Graph 2: Average Number of Communication/Month for Female Participants**

## Discussion

---

From the tables presented, the communication medium most preferred by my male participants was face-to-face communications. 50% of male subjects ranked this medium as most preferred. Ranking last among the media was US Mail. The median rankings for the male subjects showed face-to-face as most preferred followed by cellular phone, email, telephone, instant messenger and US Mail in decreasing preference.

Female responses were slightly different. 51% of female subjects ranked the cellular phone as the most preferred communication medium. While US Mail and instant messenger both had a median ranking of 5, instant messenger received a higher number of “least preferred” rankings. Mid-ranked media also differed slightly from the men. Following the cellular phone as most preferred was face-to-face, telephone, email, US Mail, and instant messenger in decreasing preference order.

Graphs 1 & 2 show the average number of communications per month for male and female participants respectively. They are broken down by the six communication media. It shows the most used communication medium among men and women is the cellular phone. The telephone, face-to-face and email received mixed mid-level preference rating, but actual usage is very close. Instant messaging and US Mail come in as the two least used communication media among both my male and female respondents.

It is interesting to point out that the synchronous communication media fared better than the asynchronous communication media in both preferred use and actual use. While email was ranked higher by mail than telephone, in general men and women prefer to use and actually use synchronous communication more than asynchronous.

## Conclusion & Future Work

---

The data suggests slight communication media preference differences between men and women when communicating with family members. While men most prefer to communicate via face-to-face communication, women prefer the cell phone. For the men in my study, the most common reason stated for choosing face-to-face as the most

preferred, was “directness.” The most common response for choosing the cell phone as second most preferred was “convenience.” Women on the other had preferred to use the cellular phone when communicating with family members. The most common reason stated was the same as the men, “convenience.” The second most preferred medium among the women in my study was “face-to-face.” although it is important to point out that both cellular phone and face-to-face had a median ranking of 2. While this is true, cell phone had more number 1 votes. Additionally, face-to-face received an equal number of votes for most preferred and second preferred.

Interestingly, both men and women ranked instant messaging and mail as second least preferred and least preferred communication medium. Most common response for those ranking IM at preference 5 was simply that they did not use instant messaging. For US Mail, the most common response was that it was outdated and took too long.

While table 1 & 2 show the “preferred” communication medium, graphs 1 & 2 show which communication medium is actually used more than others. Interestingly, the actual usage does not reflect the preferences that my subjects gave. Another interesting note is that the actual usage between the men and women in my study are almost identical. Neither of these averages reflects a resemblance to participant’s preferences.

This research offers a solid basis for continued investigation into this area of study. Future work on this project would include further investigation into explaining the differences between gender communication media preferences. It would also be interesting to determine why there are differences in men and women’s actual communication media usage. Additionally, we could expand the magnitude of this research to include an increased number of participants, from a wider range of locations. Expanding the scope of the research to include friends in addition to family would also add greater insight and value to the results.

## **Acknowledgments**

---

I would like to thank Professor Melody Ivory-Ndiaye from the University of Washington, School of Information. I would also like to thank teaching assistants, Phil Edwards and Kari Holland for their valuable guidance and insight. I would like to offer a

special thanks to fellow Informatics students Adonis Acuario and Alex Gregorio for invaluable preliminary work on this study as well as the many other Info491 students that offered feedback and recommendations on my project.

## References

---

- Caals, M. (2003). A Critical Review of Research into Differences Between Men and Women in the Use of Media for Interpersonal Communication. Retrieved November 20, 2003, from <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Students/msc0201.html>.
- Cummings, J., Kraut, R., & Kiesler, S. (2001) Do we visit, call, or email?: media matter in close relationships. Conference on Human Factors and Computing Systems, 161 – 162. Retrieved October 25, 2003 from ACM Digital Library.
- Grintner, R. E., & Palen, L. (2002) Instant Messaging in Teen Life. Computer Supported Cooperative Work: Proceedings of the 2002 ACM conference, 21-30.
- Herring, S. (1994). Gender differences in computer-mediated communication: bringing familiar baggage to the new frontier. Keynote talk at the American Library Association annual convention, June 27, 1994.
- Kraut, R., Mukhopadhyay T., Szczypula J., Kiesler S., & Scherlis W. (1998) Communication and information: alternative uses of the Internet in households. Proceedings of the SIGCHI conference on Human factors in computing systems, 368 – 375. Retrieved October 25, 2003 from ACM Digital Library.
- LaRose, R. (no publication date shown). Understanding Personal Telephone Behavior. Retrieved November 21, 2003, from <http://info.tc.msu.edu/faculty/larose/html/fonbehav.html>.
- Ray, C.M., Sormunen, C., Harris, T.M. (1999). Men's and Women's Attitudes Toward Computer Technology: A Comparison. Office Systems Research Journal, 17, 1, 1-8.
- Shapiro, M. A. (2002). Generalizability in Communication Research. Human Communication Research, 28, 4, 491-500.
- Tang, N. (1999). Differences in Women's and Men's Usage of E-mail. Retrieved November 21, 2003, from <http://www.cs.ucla.edu/~tang/papers/email-gender-diffs.html>.
- Verbick, T. (2001). Women, Technology, and Gender Bias. CCSC: Central Plains Conference, 240-250.

## Appendix A

---

### Questionnaire:

Please answer all questions to the best of your ability. No personally identifiable information will be collected. Data that is collected is kept confidential. By filling out this questionnaire, you agree to participate in this study of communication habits of men and women and the media that prefer. If any clarification is needed please ask.

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

State: \_\_\_\_\_

Sex: M F

Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

City: \_\_\_\_\_

Rank these communication media in order of preference (where 1 is the most liked) and briefly explain why you prefer one over the others.

Email

---

---

Instant Messaging

---

---

Cellular Phone

---

---

US Mail (Letter Writing)

---

---

Telephone

---

---

Face-to-face

---

---





## Appendix B

---

Consent Form:

### **CONSENT FORM** **Communication patterns of men and** **women and the media they prefer.**

#### **Researchers**

John Cap, Student, The Information School, (425) 392-9290, [jcap@u.washington.edu](mailto:jcap@u.washington.edu)

#### **Researchers' statement**

I am asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether or not to be in the study. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what we would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called 'informed consent.'

#### **Purposes and Benefits**

I want to better understand the differences in preferred communication media between men and women. I would like you to fill out this questionnaire about your communication habits. You may not directly benefit from taking part in this research study.

#### **Procedures**

If you choose to be in this study, I would like for you to fill out this questionnaire. It is completely voluntary. If you do not wish to answer any of the questions you can leave them blank.

Some participants will also be asked to participate in a second phase of this study. Those participants will be asked to fill out a journal, documenting one week of their communication. This part of the study is also voluntary. Declining to participate in phase two of my study does not disqualify any participant from participating in the questionnaire.

**Risks, Stress, or Discomfort**

Some people feel that providing information for research is an invasion of privacy. We have addressed concerns for your privacy in the section below.

**Other Information**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You can stop at any time. The study information is confidential. Only the research team will have access to the study information. No personally identifiable information will be collected.

If you have any questions about this research study, please contact John Cap at the telephone number or e-mail listed above. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, please contact the University of Washington Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Appendix C**

---

**Letter of Cooperation: Safeway**

March 25, 2004



**Dear John Cap,**

Thank you for speaking with us before conducting your data collection outside of our store. We understand that you are a student at the University of Washington and that you are working on your Senior Capstone project which is titled: Communication patterns of men and women and the media they prefer. We understand that in this study you will be investigating which communication medium men and women prefer to use when communicating with family members. You are free to distribute your surveys and journals at the Issaquah Safeway as long as you do not cause customer complaints or interfere with normal business flow. We acknowledge that while we may receive a copy of the final results of your study, all data collected is confidential.

**Thank you,**

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sandi Stokes".

**Safeway Management**