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Season's Greetings: An Analysis of Christmas Card Use

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Abstract

Christmas is the time of year when people reaffirm social connections through the medium of Christmas cards. Although much communication in the modern age is conducted via electronic means, many people continue to send and receive paper-based cards during the festive season. With a view to understanding practices surrounding the use of digital and paper-based media, this paper explores the use of paper-based and electronic Christmas cards among a sample of university students. We describe students' practices regarding Christmas cards, examining what they do, why they do it, and what they value about both paper and electronic cards. Our analysis leads to a number of design challenges for the development of electronic alternatives to paper-based cards.

Author Keywords

Christmas cards; Computer-Mediated Communication; Design; Tangible Media.

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

Introduction

The rise of electronic social media offers unparalleled opportunities for correspondence with others around

the world. One consequence of electronic media's proliferation is a decline in paper-based correspondence. Despite this apparent shift towards the use of electronic communication, one form of paper-based correspondence that remains popular is the traditional greeting card. In Britain alone, over 2.2 billion cards are sent per year, including 1.5 billion Christmas cards, 327 million birthday cards, 34 million anniversary cards, and 11 million wedding cards [5]. These figures indicate that greeting cards still serve an important purpose in an era where electronic communication is now the norm. Indeed, the continued popularity of physical cards stands in stark contrast to the overall declining use of paper-based media.

Why do paper-based cards remain popular in an era where a majority of communication is mediated by computers? In this paper, we seek to understand practices surrounding the use of electronic and paper-based greeting cards, focusing in particular on the use of Christmas cards during the festive season. The continued use of paper cards at Christmas time is intriguing given the presence of electronic alternatives (so-called 'e-cards'), which are presumably more convenient, faster, and cheaper than paper cards. Using a survey study, we seek to demystify practices surrounding the use of cards at Christmastime.

Background and Related Work

Although Christmas is traditionally thought of as a Christian holiday, it is "one of the few rituals that is celebrated around the world, even in countries which do not have a Christian tradition" [7, 10]. The exchange of Christmas cards is identified as a central aspect of the festive season [17].

Within HCI, researchers have generally paid little attention to Christmas and to practices surrounding exchange at Christmas. In one recent study, Petrelli et al. [13], explored novel technologies for promoting interaction at Christmas time, finding that use of paper cards as festive decoration was a significant part of the Christmas experience. However, their study did not specifically examine practices and values concerning Christmas cards, nor did they specifically examine the use of greeting cards or electronic media to exchange greetings.

As a tool for expressing festive greetings, Christmas cards serve an important purpose. The festive season is one of a handful of times when most people reconnect with their extended social circle [2]. What is interesting about Christmas cards is that paper-based Christmas cards remain popular despite an upward trend in the use of digital media for communicating.

Within HCI, an emergent body of work seeks to understand perceptions of worth and value in the exchange of paper based media. For example, [6] found that the use of paper-based postcards was partly motivated by aspects of the medium (e.g. handwriting and opportunities for personalization) that are sometimes lost during digitization. Sellen et al. [18] obtained similar results in their evaluation of a mixed media messaging system intended for use in the home. Through investigating Christmas card use, we hope to contribute to this literature by further understanding how people use and value paper and electronic media. Given the continued popularity of paper Christmas cards, we want to better understand what it is that makes them special. Through understanding such factors, we hope to transpose them into digital

systems, in turn leading to novel user experiences involving mixed media communication tools.

Study Design

We wanted to explore peoples' behaviours regarding the sending of Christmas Cards and what the perceived values are of paper-based and e-cards. From these questions we can derive an understanding of existing practices and thus guidelines for the development of successful electronic card exchange systems. This paper reports the findings of an online survey, designed to collect data about our questions, and presents implications for the design of electronic communication tools.

We designed a 21-question survey requesting demographic information alongside questions eliciting quantitative and qualitative data about the exchange of Christmas cards. The questionnaire was distributed online over two weeks prior to Christmas. The study was conducted at a well-known British University.

We wanted to use University students as our initial study population as we believe that as students have grown up using technology they are the population most amenable to sending Christmas e-cards. As such they are likely to offer value judgements that go beyond technological confidence. In further work we hope to expand our study population to better understand whether different demographics have distinct Christmas card practices.

Participants were recruited through online advertisements and were offered the chance to win four prizes of £10 as an incentive to participate in the study. Data cleaning of nonsense or blank questionnaires left

us with 47 complete responses from 32 females and 15 males. Participants' ages ranged from 17 – 55 (*Mean* = 25, *Median* = 21).

We gathered respondents' religious affiliation to determine whether it had an impact on their approach to sending Christmas cards. Our respondents included people of Christian (15), Atheist (14), Agnostic (4), Muslim (1), Sikh (1), Hindi (1) and Not Listed (11) faith. We found that religion was not a determinant of whether or not participants sent cards; religious affiliation did not appear to impact sending behaviour. This points towards a cultural shift, particularly in Britain, where Christmas is seen as more of a sociocultural event, as opposed to a religious festival in the strictest sense [11, 17]. As such we saw no need to use religious affiliation as a control variable within our analysis of the data.

Analysis

The qualitative results presented in this paper were elicited from an analysis of aggregated responses to these questions, grouped according to each of our key themes. When interpreting responses, we adopted an approach of open coding, such that themes were allowed to emerge through multiple, independent readings of the data.

Results

Number of Cards Sent and Received

We asked our participants whether they sent paper or electronic cards. Of our 47 respondents, 45 said they sent paper cards, with 2 stating they did not use them. Conversely, just 15 people sent electronic cards and 32 did not send them. When specifically asked how many Christmas cards they had sent this year, 8 people said

that they had sent zero paper cards, whereas 33 people said they had sent zero electronic cards. There was a significant difference between the number of electronic cards sent ($M = 3.21$, $SD = 8.94$) and the number of paper cards sent ($M = 21.19$, $SD = 36.21$), paired $t(46) = -3.29$, $p = .002$. More paper cards were sent, on average, than electronic ones.

Practices

We first examined *to whom* our participants sent Christmas cards and *why*. We found that students typically sent cards to family and close friends. The primary purpose of the cards is to cement and reaffirm people's relationships [2]. Each card serves as an indication that the sender is thinking about the receiver, wants to make that person happy, and that the cards are about knowing who loves the recipient. In other words, each card is invested with value that goes beyond the aesthetics and content of the card (cf. [13]): "*To show people I care and to spread good cheer around at this time of year*" [R. 10].

This social glue seems particularly important when it comes to people who live a substantial distance apart. The cards act as a reminder that the receiver is still a significant part of the sender's social circle: "*I send also to my friends overseas as a way of making them understand that they are still in my life*" [R. 15]. In addition, the distance between the sender and recipient influences the choice of medium; the further away someone lives, the more likely it is that they will be sent an electronic rather than a paper card.

Preference for Paper

Students showed a strong preference for *receiving* paper cards, even among those people who don't like

or enjoy *sending* paper cards. The reasoning seems to be that because the sender themselves likes receiving paper cards, they think other people will like them too. This is not about reciprocity but about the individual's preference in terms of medium: "*Because I like the thought of receiving a proper Christmas card and I think it's the same for other people*" [R. 12].

Our respondents also enjoyed receiving paper cards because they arrive through the physical mail system. The most common explanation here was that paper cards break from the mundane qualities of modern post: "*It's always exciting to receive something interesting to read in the post that isn't junk mail*" [R. 11]. Similar results have been found with other items sent through the post (e.g. [6]) without a clear explanation as to *why* paper is regarded as being superior to electronic.

Personalization and Effort

A salient feature that distinguishes responses concerning paper and e-cards is related to personalization. In general, paper cards were seen as amenable to personalization, with electronic cards seen as impersonal. Forms of personalization varied from handwriting through to actual handmade cards. This process of personalization helps associate the card with the individual who has sent it: "*I hand make all of my cards and write individual personal messages in each one*" [R. 40], "*I like seeing what someone has written in them*" [R. 4].

Conversely, the lack of personalization opportunities when creating e-cards is a negative property linked to their relative undesirability. The lack of effort and meaning which are associated with this lack of

personalization suggest that, as a form of social glue, e-cards are much less powerful: "*Because I think they are impersonal and meaningless*" [R. 36].

Evidence of personalization also seemed to increase the perceived worth of each card, with people also ascribing more value to paper cards than electronic ones due to tradition, the effort involved, and some sense of authenticity: "*Paper card seems to show my concern and effort more than electronic one*" [R. 16]. On the other hand, electronic cards were perceived less favourably, and sometimes as wholly inappropriate: "*They don't count as proper Christmas cards*" [R. 13].

Decoration

One of the traditions of Christmas is to decorate the home [11, 13]. Making the house more festive was a valued property of paper cards: "*You can put paper cards up to make the house more festive*" [R. 26].

This was something which electronic cards were seen as not providing. E-cards were predominantly seen as a computer-based media rather than something that could be viewed and shared: "*I don't like them [e-cards] because I prefer to have something that you can put up in the room rather than something just on your computer*" [R. 23].

Related to the display of cards, a few people saw the ability to retain correspondence as significant. While this was perceived as possible with paper cards, e-cards were not viewed in the same way, despite the ability to theoretically retain them in physical form via printing: "*I like to be able to keep them and look at them whenever I feel like it*" [R. 12].

Discussion

Our aim for this paper was to better understand the Christmas card sending practices of students. Our results show that students do continue to send Christmas cards, and demonstrate a preference for sending and receiving paper cards as a mechanism for strengthening social bonds. Our analysis establishes a variety of issues concerning the properties of paper-based and electronic cards. For example, electronic cards were often described as cheap, impersonal, and of less worth than a paper equivalent, though e-cards were seen as fit for purpose when greeting far-flung friends or when senders were pressed for time. Conversely, paper cards were seen as more amenable to personalization, as more fitting with tradition, and were of greater value. We now attempt to distil our findings into a variety of design challenges for electronic card sending systems. Specifically, these factors were: *Personalization, Effort, Decoration and Display and Creating Value*. These factors are predominantly associated with paper cards, giving rise to a number of design challenges for enhancing the value of electronic cards.

The first property we identified was the creative investment of personalization in paper cards. In general, respondents valued the fact that paper cards showed clear evidence of personalization, traces of the other person; for example, cards often contained handwriting, and some cards were made by hand rather than simple customisations in terms of colour or font. Previous work has also found that personalization was appreciated in other contexts involving personal communication (e.g. [4, 6, 18]). Unlike paper cards, e-cards currently offer relatively few opportunities for meaningful personalization, and many e-card systems

do not go beyond animation and simple typewritten text. We argue that e-card systems need to consider how to integrate in meaningful personalisation.

Our participants also indicated that they appreciated the effort invested by the sender in creating the personalized cards. Likewise, the lack of effort required to send an e-card seems to devalue its worth. We should make clear that this needs to be *meaningful* effort, not *meaningless* effort, e.g., with an interface that is difficult to use [15]. Meaningful effort also needs to be readily interpretable by the recipient, else it bears little value to either party. The design challenge, then, is to offer opportunities to imbue e-cards with evidence of the investment of effort.

We found people valued paper cards because of their decorative value, making their house feel more Christmassy. Conversely, e-cards were seen as 'fire-and-forget' - with no physical presence, people did not return to the cards after viewing them once. Physical cards carry additional meaning because repeated viewing may encourage the viewer to reflect on their relationship with the sender - an e-card is likely to remain within the recipient's email inbox. The design challenge, then, is to change the structure of e-cards such that they can be displayed in a meaningful manner.

All of these factors speak to the need to rethink and reconsider what form e-cards can take. In the same way that web-design has matured from geocities style sites to more developed designs, e-cards have to change from being simply emails with attachments into something which is considered to be less cheap, tacky and worthless. It is hoped that the design factors we

have presented here could go some way towards achieving that transformation.

Conclusion and Further Work

Christmas is a time when people attempt, through the medium of cards, to cherish existing social connections and re-establish those that may have been lost. Yet in a world where paper-based correspondence is increasingly rare, people persist with the user of paper-based cards in favour of electronic alternatives. In this study we have thrown light on card sending practices Christmas card sending practices among students of University age. Our data indicates that paper-based Christmas cards remain the de facto medium for expressing Christmas cheer. Based on our analysis and current design discourse in HCI, we have proposed a number of design challenges with regards to enhancing the perceived value of electronic cards; specifically *Personalization, Effort, Decoration and Display, and Creating Value.*

In future work we aim to widen the scope of our investigation by examining a variety of populations across the world. In particular we would seek out a more diverse range of respondents, looking at a broader demographic to ensure that our conclusions speak to wider audiences. To strengthen the conclusions, we would triangulate our data with some in-depth interview sessions to further unwrap the role of Christmas cards in modern society. This would help us examine the design challenges in more depth and give us the ability to propose some solutions.

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