'Helpful but Not Bothered': The Effects of Giving Out Fake Email Addresses

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Problem + Why does it matter?

Recent research has focused on the phenomenon of misdirected email: email messages that are sent to wrong recipients. Our research goal was to investigate situations where people may give out an email address they have made up and believe to be fake, which could be one potential cause for misdirected email.

Keywords

fa·ke e·mail add·ress – an email address given out in place of one's real email address, typically his or her name or initials and numbers including an @something.com

Methods

Twenty interviews were conducted and transcribed prior to my involvement with this project. I anonymized the transcripts by removing any identifiable information, such as first and last names, and replaced them with unidentifiable substitutes. NVivo, a qualitative data analysis computer software package, was used for initial open coding, or using few words or short phrases to summarize participants' responses. There were a total of 391 codes used. With theses codes, I was able to find 46 reoccurring themes throughout the transcripts.

Findings

Would Not Give an Email Address

100%

8 – privacy concerns
7 – not giving an email address feels good

Would Give an Email Address

100%

15 – online situations
14 – in-person situations

Helpful But Not Bothered

50%

7 – been in their shoes
15 – one-time thing
4 – illegible email address

*"I was **helping the cause** anyways, but I **didn't want to be bothered** with any more responsibility down the road."*
– P01

Importance of Legitimacy

90%

8 – hard to lie
6 – scared of being caught giving a fake email address
13 – used real name/initials in fake email address

*"[I]f I had to fake an email for a real person, I would do something to **similar to mine**. I'd pick something that **sounds legitimate** as an email."*
– P02

Other People's Email Address

65%

6 – email address may be real
6 – assumed unused email address
7 – against giving out fake email

*"I'd feel bad, someone getting just spam, but who knows? Maybe **someone has that email address** now."*
– P06

Conclusion

Because these fake emails resembled real email addresses, anyone who tried to contact the participant might end up sending email to someone other than the intended recipient. This study highlights the increased concern for privacy amongst email users, in terms of exerting some control over who has their real email address. Our findings help us understand email users' motivations, which will enable us to make recommendations for ways that email might become more privacy-friendly.

Design Solutions

Questionnaire -

Verification this is your email address and not a fake email address; first pet's name or mother's maiden name?

Second Email -

Created along with real email address; act as a spam folder; can give this email address in place of a fake email address

Question + Learned Response -

System improves by asking user where to filter email messages; learned responses prevents users from missing important messages
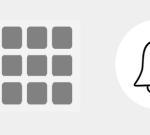
Opt Out Option -

Ease the process of unsubscribing; "opt out" button clearly displayed at checkout, online, and in email account

Acknowledgement