

# THE IMPACT OF E-MAIL ADDRESS ON CREDIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*The researchers have often been surprised to see the e-mail addresses used by our students and colleagues. Many students and faculty choose their own user names and choose their providers. E-mail addresses may provide an insight into the background and employment situation of the user. This study quantifies the impact that e-mail address choices have on the perceived credibility of the person who uses that account. The authors make recommendations on how individuals and institutions can maintain their credibility simply by adopting e-mail policies.*

## INTRODUCTION

The learning environment is constantly changing as the technologies used by faculty and students change. Current students expect technology to be part of their education and e-mail is commonly used for communication and teaching technology [1]. University students tend to be ahead of the rest of society in the adoption, use, and abandonment of technologies [2]. In the early days of e-mail, there was not much choice in which e-mail account to use. Faculty only had their school account. With free accounts, anonymous accounts, and accounts tied to cell phones, many faculty members now have their choice of a number of e-mail addresses.

Schools are using more adjunct or part-time instructors than ever before [3]. Many schools rely on large numbers of adjunct faculty who have “day jobs” with other employers. Many of these adjunct faculty members use their work e-mail accounts to maintain their connection to students. One study found that only 23.9% of adjunct faculty had school-provided e-mail accounts [3]. Without a school e-mail account the adjuncts have no choice but to use their work e-mail accounts or a commercial alternative.

## THE IMPACT OF E-MAIL ADDRESS ON FACULTY CREDIBILITY

Maintaining credibility in the classroom is important to all faculty members. There are a number of components that have been proven to impact the perception of faculty credibility including gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and choice of clothing [4]. Student impressions of faculty credibility impact the ratings that they give to faculty. Several studies have documented how increasing the amount of faculty-student contact outside of the classroom increases the positive ratings students give to faculty.

To determine student perceptions of faculty credibility, students were asked to take a survey presenting a series of questions about a fictional faculty member teaching a class they would be taking. The only information that the students had about the faculty member was their e-mail address. To eliminate or at least minimize gender and name bias, the survey only used popular male names. The names used in a survey were a combination of the most popular first and surnames according to two different sources. The three most popular surnames in America were once Smith, Johnson, and Brown [5]. According to the United States Social Security Administration, the three most popular first names for males in 2007 were Jacob, Michael, and Ethan [6].

The username and e-mail service provider were the independent variables and perceived credibility was the dependent variable. The following research hypotheses were evaluated:

- H1: Student perception of faculty credibility will be impacted by the domain name used in the email address
- H2: Student perception of faculty credibility will be impacted by the use of nicknames in the user name

This survey was created with the NSurvey tool and invitations to take the survey were sent to 1,000 of the currently enrolled students at an upper division business school in the suburbs of Detroit. Upper division students have all had a minimum of two years of college courses and thus been exposed to a variety of faculty.

The survey questions were structured like: You are considering taking Professor Michael Johnson for a section of the "Introduction to Technology" course that is a requirement for your major field of study. Based on his e-mail address of Michael.Johnson@aol.com, how credible do you feel Professor Johnson is? Please rate Professor Johnson's credibility on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all credible) to 7 (extremely credible, credible, no opinion, not credible).

The survey found that both username and domain name were significant in determining the students' perception of faculty credibility [7]. The most credible combination was using a full name as the username on the school's e-mail domain. Using a nickname or commercial e-mail provider led to low perceptions of credibility. The survey results are summarized in Table 1.

It is also important how faculty feel about the credibility of other faculty members. Many faculty do research and grant applications with colleagues that they only contact via e-mail. To determine faculty perceptions of peer cred-

ibility, faculty members at a community college in South-eastern Michigan were asked to take a survey presenting a series of questions about a fictional faculty member proposing a collaborative research project. The only information that the surveyed faculty members had about their peer was their e-mail address. To eliminate or at least minimize gender and name bias, the survey only used popular male names

The username and e-mail service provider were the independent variables and perceived credibility was the dependent variable. The following research hypotheses were evaluated:

- H1: Faculty perception of peer credibility will be impacted by the domain name used in the email address
- H2: Faculty perception of peer credibility will be impacted by the use of nicknames in the user name

The survey was constructed with the Survey Monkey tools. The survey questions were structured like: You received an e-mail from someone claiming to be a faculty member of a school in another state that is similar in size and mission to your school. The person is sending the e-mail is proposing a research collaboration between the two schools and is requesting your involvement. All you know about the faculty member is their e-mail address of Michael.Johnson@HFCC.edu. Based solely on the e-mail address how credible do you feel this faculty member is?

The survey found that both username and domain name were significant in determining the faculty's perception of faculty peer credibility [7]. The most credible combination was using a full name as the username on the school's e-mail domain. Using a nickname or commercial e-mail provider led to low perceptions of credibility. The survey results are summarized in Table 2.

### THE IMPACT OF E-MAIL ADDRESS ON STUDENT CREDIBILITY

The researchers determined that there are two components of student credibility that are impacted by e-mail address. The first component is the impression their e-mail address has on faculty and the second component is the impact their e-mail address has on how other students perceive them. Many students maintain multiple e-mail accounts to separate their social life from their educational life [2]. Students are using e-mail to communicate with each other and their faculty. Faculty members are increasingly relying on e-mail to communicate with their students. E-mail allows faculty to communicate with individual students, small groups, or entire classes at the same time [1]. Many faculty use e-mail to communicate with their students in both on-ground and online classes. A research study was done for each of the two aspects of student credibility. The first study was to measure faculty perceptions of student credibility based on e-mail address. The username and mail service provider were the independent variables and perceived credibility was the dependent variable. The following research hypotheses were evaluated:

- H1 Faculty perception of student credibility will be impacted by the domain name used in the email address
- H2 Faculty perception of student credibility will be impacted by the use of nicknames in the user name

This survey was created with the SurveyMonkey tool and invitations to take the survey were sent to the full time and adjunct members at an upper division business school in the suburbs of Detroit. Upper division students have all had a minimum of two years of college courses and thus been exposed to a variety of faculty. The survey questions were structured like: You received an e-mail from Michael Johnson who has registered for one of your

classes next semester. Based solely on his e-mail address of Michael.Johnson@AOL.com how credible do you feel this student is? Please rate Michael Johnson's credibility on a scale ranging from not credible to extremely credible (not credible, credible, extremely credible, no opinion)

The survey found that both username and domain name were significant in determining the faculty's perception of student credibility [8]. The most credible combination was using a full name as the username on the school's e-mail domain. Using a nickname or commercial e-mail provider led to low perceptions of credibility. The survey results are summarized in Table 3.

The second component of student credibility is student perceive their fellow students. The growth in online education has led to students working together on projects that have never met or even seen pictures of each other. Online students are placed into small groups to complete group assignments and promote a collaborative learning process [9]. In some cases, the only clue to peer credibility that online students have is the e-mail address used by their fellow students. Students will question how credible their peers are and whether they will be able to perform on the group assignments [10]. Students who feel that they are teamed with less credible peers may become discouraged.

Researchers have studied how e-mail addresses impact how credible students appear to their peers [11]. The population for this phase of the research project was students at a community college in suburban Detroit. All of the students were enrolled in at least one online class. The username and mail service provider were the independent variables and perceived credibility was the dependent variable. The following research hypotheses were evaluated:

- H1 Student perception of peer credibility will be impacted by the domain name used in the email address

**TABLE 1**  
**SUMMARIZED SURVEY RESULTS OF**  
**STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF FACULTY CREDIBILITY**

Email Account	Extremely Credible	Credible	Not Credible	No Opinion	Total
Full name at walshcollege.edu	84	52	0	21	157
Full name at EDS.com	35	90	12	22	159
Full name at aol.com	4	95	26	34	159
Nickname at EDS.com	3	48	76	32	159
Nickname at walshcollege.edu	3	47	82	27	159
Nickname at aol.com	0	26	100	32	158

**TABLE 2**  
**SUMMARIZED SURVEY RESULTS OF**  
**FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF PEER CREDIBILITY**

Email Account	Extremely Credible	Credible	Not Credible	Doubtful Credibility	No Opinion	Total
Full name at HFCC.edu	4	61	11	4	31	109
Full name at EDS.com	0	9	14	47	41	111
Full name at aol.com	0	3	20	60	29	112
Nickname at EDS.com	0	0	37	58	17	112
Nickname at HFCC.edu	0	0	92	57	13	112
Nickname at aol.com	0	1	18	61	31	11

**TABLE 3**  
**SUMMARIZED SURVEY RESULTS OF**  
**FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT CREDIBILITY**

Email Account	Extremely Credible	Credible	Not Credible	No Opinion	Total
Full name at walshcollege.edu	31	22	0	8	61
Full name at EDS.com	18	32	2	9	61
Full name at aol.com	15	36	1	0	62
Nickname at AOL.com	0	29	20	13	62
Nickname at walshcollege.edu	1	7	45	7	60
Nickname at aol.com	0	10	43	7	60

H2 Student perception of peer credibility will be impacted by the use of nicknames in the user name

This survey was created with the SurveyMonkey tool. The survey questions were structured like: You are enrolled in an online section of the "Introduction to Technology" course that is a requirement for your major field of study. You have never met any of the other students enrolled in your section and are unlikely to meet them in the future. You have been assigned to work with another student on a group project. All that you know about this student is their e-mail address. Based on the e-mail address of MrBaseball@ EDS.com, how credible do you feel that your fellow student is? Please rate the student on a scale that ranges from not credible to extremely credible (not credible, credible, extremely credible, no opinion).

The survey found that both username and domain name were significant in determining the students' perception of peer credibility [11]. The most credible combination was using a full name as the username on the school's e-mail domain. Using a nickname or commercial e-mail provider led to low perceptions of credibility. The survey results are summarized in Table 4.

**CONCLUSIONS**

All four studies found that both username and domain name significantly impacted the perception of credibility for both students and faculty. In all cases, the strongest perceptions of credibility were using the full name for the username and the school domain. Using nicknames and other e-mail providers weakens the perception of academic credibility.

These studies were significant for a number of reasons. Students who wish to appear more credible to both their peers and faculty should use their school provided e-mail accounts. Faculty members need to be careful to avoid the "halo" effect when evaluating students and not allow one

perception of credibility to impact their assessments in other areas. A study in the United Kingdom found that faculty members carried positive impressions over from one area of student work to others [12]. This type of halo effect might be stronger in online education because there are fewer types of student-faculty contact.

Faculty who wish to appear more credible to their students should use their school provided e-mail account. Faculty who are used to using their cell phones and outside e-mail accounts must understand the price they pay for the convenience of using these accounts.

The impact of faculty losing credibility by not using their school provided e-mail account should be reflected in school policy. Schools that are interested in increasing or at the very least, maintaining perceived faculty credibility should require faculty to use their school provided e-mail accounts [13].

**TABLE 4**  
**SUMMARIZED SURVEY RESULTS OF**  
**PEER PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENT CREDIBILITY**

Email Account	Extremely Credible	Credible	Not Credible	No Opinion	Total
Nickname at EDS.com	2	12	30	53	97
Full name at AOL.com	7	37	8	34	96
Full name at HFCC.edu	24	43	2	22	91
Full name at EDS.com	7	41	10	35	93
Full name at HFCC.edu	19	37	2	22	80
Nickname at AOL.com	3	18	23	44	88
Full name at AOL.com	3	27	9	44	83
Nickname at HFCC.edu	7	18	18	41	84

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