Dear Executive Recruiter

A Generic Exploration of Professional Email Anxiety

by

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For Mom and Dad

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Abstract

As a college student, I became fascinated by the complexities of the professional email writing process. I argue that young professional email participants experience enormous anxiety in response to the genre's challenges, including seemingly rigid conventions, facilitation of stereotyping, and amplification of non-dominant identity traits. To combat these obstacles, student applicants seek creative ways to gain agency. Their anxiety and resourcefulness demonstrate both a desire and need for more accessible and empowering teachings of professional email correspondence.

The introduction contains a description of my methods. To better understand the relationship of student applicants to professional email, I weave together interviews with seven University of Michigan seniors, scholarship about genre and standpoint theory, and my own experiences.

Chapter one uses genre theory to provide a foundational understanding of professional email conventions. Genre theorists John Frow and J.L. Lemke argue against the mainstream misconception of genre as a rigid, restrictive rule, instead advocating for genre as a flexible, empowering resource. I examine students' perceptions of professional email conventions, revealing that they perceive genre as closer to a rigid rule than an empowering resource. Students also describe learning professional email practices from friends and family members, illustrating a lack of formal, centralized resources from which students can learn the genre.

Chapter two uses standpoint theory to explore how demographic qualities and feelings of belonging affect applicants' professional email experiences. The reductive nature of professional email can both amplify and conceal non-dominant identity traits, making underrepresented applicants vulnerable to negative stereotyping. In response to these challenges, student applicants harness creative ways to gain agency both in and outside of professional email's generic framework. Within the framework, students describe ways they use genre conventions to their own advantage. Outside the framework, students join identity-based business organizations. Both actions demonstrate students' desires to gain agency in relation to profession email correspondence.

In the conclusion, I propose the creation of an open education resource featuring J.L. Lemke's generic teachings to make professional email correspondence a more accessible and empowering means of communication.

Keywords: professional email, genre theory, standpoint theory

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Introduction

Amidst all the fairytale features of my junior year semester abroad, I remained grounded by one particularly heavy weight: my upcoming summer unemployment. An expectation has emerged that college students secure an internship between their junior and senior years of school, but I had left for Prague with my summer months wholly unscheduled. By day, I wandered cobblestone streets, speaking broken Czech and hunting inexpensive gelato. By night, I retreated to my laptop, frantically distributing my resume online and reaching out to company recruiters.

Eastern European cell service was spotty, and I struggled to juggle my Czech and American phone numbers, so my primary means of professional stateside communication became email. I developed a complicated routine: first, I would draft a short message, which could take anywhere from 10-30 minutes. Then, I would have my roommate scan the email for typos. After she approved my spelling and grammar, we would engage in a heated debate over something like my subject line, or closing salutation—is "sincerely" antiquated? Is "best" too casual? Following this conversation with my roommate, I sought approval from my mom. After forwarding her the email draft, she would call me and object to the very edits my roommate had just made. Finally, we would reach some sort of agreement, only occasionally requiring my father as a tiebreaker. I re-read the email another dozen times before hitting send.

I could not understand the stress and complexity of this process. As an English major, I am constantly required to write, communicate with others, and articulate my ideas. So why was it so difficult to participate in the most basic of business correspondences? I would dismiss this neuroticism as a personal quirk had I not observed its prevalence among my friends, each of

whom has developed their own anxiety-stricken routines for producing professional emails. As further affirmation of this widespread angst, there are entire industries targeting anxious professional email writers: "how to write a professional email" yields over one hundred thousand results on Google.

After securing a summer internship and returning to the US, I remained fixated on the professional email writing process. The more I talked about it, the more I found others empathizing, excited to discuss their own experiences, confusions, and frustrations. Everybody seemed to have a story, or a strong and arbitrary opinion on specific email elements. It is possible I am an enormous drama queen, surrounded by like-minded drama queens, but I believe something larger is at stake here.

Contemporary conversation on professional email correspondence, dominated by business professors and self-help bloggers, positions professional email as a rigid, necessary evil to be endured. *Wall Street Journal* contributor Christopher Mims calls the process "a rite of passage…the digital equivalent of putting on a shirt and tie" (Mims). He reduces the professional email to an un-fun, unfortunate formality. I do not think Mims is wrong, but limiting the cultural conversation on professional email to dismissive columns and instructive listicles is to ignore the very real psycho-social effects of the phenomenon.

In an effort to better understand professional email writing anxiety and how we might reduce it, this thesis analyzes college-age job applicants' engagements with professional email. Weaving together interviews with seven college seniors, scholarship about genre and standpoint theory, and my own experiences, I argue that student applicants are experiencing enormous anxiety in response to professional email's generic challenges, including rigid conventions, facilitation of stereotyping, and amplification of non-dominant identity traits. As a result, these

applicants are harnessing creative ways to gain agency, demonstrating a societal need for more accessible and empowering teachings of professional email correspondence.

I am defining professional email correspondence as only the exchange of emails between aspiring job applicants and company recruiters and/or points of contact. I have chosen to focus specifically on these emails as they are extremely common, and their introductory nature creates a visible tension with the restrictive conventions of professional email. When drafting introductory professional emails, students face the challenge of forging a personal connection within the confines of professionalism. Their intended message might be at odds with their medium, helping to highlight the ways in which these students navigate such challenges.

To better understand young adults' experiences with professional email, I have conducted qualitative interviews with seven University of Michigan seniors. This small sample size is not intended to be representative of any larger population, but rather to explore nuanced, textured examples of authentic, individual experiences. As a college senior myself, I have seen this demographic grapple with the professional email writing process, struggling to secure jobs for upcoming adulthood. Additionally, I sought to interview an equal distribution of males and females as well as business majors and economics majors. University of Michigan business students are required to take two business communications courses, while economics students are not. I am interested in investigating the effects of a formal business communications education on professional email practices, so I have attempted to stabilize other variable factors. This distribution of academic disciplines allows me to control for comparable academic curriculums and professional aspirations, meaning I am working with students who take similar classes and aspire to similar professions as to keep these external variables constant.

Because gender, race, and socioeconomic class influence business dynamics, I also structured my interviews to reflect as wide a range of perspectives as possible. In order to recruit a diverse sample pool, I utilized techniques for maximum outreach. To contact economics majors, I sent an email through the University of Michigan Undergraduate Economics Resources administrators (Appendix A). To reach business majors, I adapted this email for Facebook and posted it in the "Ross BBA Class of 2018" Facebook group of 607 members (Appendix B). Those who followed up on the original email and Facebook post were asked to take a brief personal survey (Appendix C) so that I might best select for a wide range of genders, races, and socioeconomic classes. All participants were allowed to choose the name by which they would be referenced in this thesis. Table 1 includes these selected names as well as participants' surveyed demographic information.

Table 1: Participant Demographic Information

Name	Major	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Class
Evan	Economics	Male	Hispanic/Latino	Upper
Matt	Economics	Male	White	Middle
DewRina	Economics, Mathematics	Female	Asian/Pacific Islander	Lower Middle
Amol	Business Administration	Male	Asian/Pacific Islander	Upper Middle
MJ	Business Administration	Male	White	Upper Middle
Jennifer	Business Administration	Female	Asian/Pacific Islander	Middle
Alyssa	Business Administration	Female	White	Upper Middle

The interviews ranged from roughly 40 minutes to an hour in length and I compensated participants with a $25 Visa Gift Card. The interviews were structured using a series of questions

related to background and demographic information, email-specific practices, and more general experiences with job recruiting (Appendix D).

Chapter one explores professional email correspondence as a genre. The seemingly strict genre conventions of professional email cause students to experience anxiety about performing protocols, often leading students to feel that the genre prevents them from expressing themselves authentically. Chapter two focuses on marginalized students specifically, using standpoint theory to examine the ways in which the white, male, and upper-class world of business filters insiders from outsiders. Students recount ways in which the reductive nature of professional email makes non-dominant identities both more visible and less visible. In the face of these obstacles, student applicants harness creative ways to gain agency both in and outside of professional email's generic framework. Ultimately, I argue that professional email participants' anxiety and resourcefulness demonstrate both a desire and attempt to change professional email correspondence to a more accessible and empowering means of communication. In the conclusion, I propose pedagogical options to facilitate this change.

Although this thesis addresses challenges and anxieties primarily in relation to professional email correspondence, its larger implications stretch far beyond our online inboxes. Professional email provides an example of the ways in which everyday activities articulate modern inequalities, as well as a story of human resilience and creativity in the face of societal restraints. Better understanding both the problematic and empowering elements of professional email brings us closer to improving the complex world that makes such genres possible.

Chapter 1

Professional Email Conventions: Education, Perception, and Accessibility

I was inspired to write this thesis by my own experiences and frustrations with professional email correspondence, particularly my inexplicable allegiance to a complex set of unwritten rules. These do's and don'ts of professional email etiquette felt simultaneously foggy and important—while I could not number nor cite the unsponsored regulations, I knew with grave certainty that my success as an email sender depended deeply on my ability to abide by them. It felt confusing and unfair. Ultimately, I would learn that these rules were called conventions. Moreover, my frustration was not rooted in the conventions themselves but rather in the restrictive way I had been brought to perceive them. The effects of this understanding would prove liberating.

Genre theory is an essential component of my argument as it provides a foundation for understanding the function of conventions, those unwritten rules of professional email correspondence I had found to be so anxiety-inducing. Building on the work of Australian academic John Frow, I argue that genres are better understood as fluid frameworks than rigid means of categorization. In a similar vein, J. L. Lemke advocates for the instruction of professional email as a resource, in which conventions are flexible and empowering, as opposed to a rule, in which conventions are rigid and restrictive. Both my interviewees and I have primarily learned professional email conventions from human resources, including friends, family members, and mentors. Our discussions of professional email conventions, including structure, formal language, brevity, and enthusiasm, suggest that we understand professional email conventions as rigid, or rule-like. The seemingly strict nature of professional email

conventions causes us to experience anxiety about performing these protocols, leading us to feel that the genre prevents us from expressing ourselves authentically.

Professional email functions as a genre, using conventions to generate expectations and therefore inform meaning. In *Genre*, John Frow presents genres as flexible frameworks used to derive meaning from texts by comparing them with each other. Genres identify similarities among texts, and these similarities become conventions. Conventions can include language, style, plot, organization, audience, and any other qualities that unite items within a genre. When associating texts with certain conventions or genres, an expectation emerges as to how the texts should be both read and written, thus shaping the texts' meaning. To illustrate this idea, Frow asks his readers to consider a short string of words that he first identifies as a newspaper headline (Frow 6). Later, Frow presents a nearly identical string of words as a line of poetry (Frow 8). Frow's exercise asks his readers to contemplate the ways in which generic contexts generate expectations and alter meaning. How does the very same text differ when read as a headline versus as a piece of poetry? Frow's exercise also demonstrates the omnipresence of genre, which extends far beyond Netflix's organization of its latest offerings. Generic expectations affect how we interact with almost all cultural phenomena. Frow identifies this truth as a primary purpose for writing his book: "Far from being merely 'stylistic' devices, genres create effects of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, which are central to the different ways the world is understood in the writing of history or of philosophy or of science, or in painting, or in everyday talk" (Frow 2). Genre is high stakes: the manner in which information is presented affects its credibility, or "authority," thus informing what information is to be trusted as "reality and truth." As a result, the people most capable of effectively executing genre, those best able to perform genre conventions, wield enormous power.

Using these conventions has real world implications. Frow insists, "Genre is not just a matter of codes and conventions, but that it also calls into play durable social institutions, and the organization of physical space" (Frow 13). Professional email is notoriously marked by "codes and conventions," and these stylistic elements are both producers and products of the "durable social institutions" in which they are used. The conventions create cycles: the highly structured emails establish a basis for "authority" within their social institutions, resulting in a necessity to master the highly structured email conventions, resulting in more highly structured emails. Consequently, genre affects the "organization of physical space." Genres and the conventions that they feature create barriers to entry. Without the "authority" leant by effective use of genre, one cannot pass in certain circles. Depending on the genre, conventions might be taught disproportionately to certain communities, allowing these communities higher rates of access to such culturally restricted areas.

While explaining the power and prevalence of genre, Frow challenges an understanding of genre "as a prescriptive taxonomy and as a constraint on textual energy" (Frow 28). This misconception of genre as a rigid classification system to which texts belong, tying down and therefore limiting their meanings, is "the traditional and still prevalent view of genre" (Frow 24). Instead, Frow argues for genre as a dynamic framework. He claims that texts cannot belong to genres because each text is both infinitely similar to and infinitely different from all other texts— to assign a text to a single genre would be to reduce both the text and the genre itself (Frow 25). French philosopher Jacques Derrida adds, "[The law of genre is] a sort of participation without belonging—a taking part in without being a part of, without having membership in a set" (Derrida 58). Derrida articulates the shifting nature of generic labels. They function as useful and descriptive tools, but they are never definitive, as texts are endlessly informing genres while

genres endlessly inform texts. Frow praises the "productive ambivalence" of Derrida's argument (Frow 28), but he believes that even Derrida describes genre too stiffly. The French philosopher perceives genre as "limit-drawing," or restrictive (Derrida 58), while Frow perceives genre as "meaning-making," or productive. In short, Frow argues against mainstream misconceptions, illustrating genre as a flexible, meaning-making framework.

To me and my interview subjects, who had believed conventions to consist of an unforgiving and therefore anxiety-inducing list of restrictions, Frow's flexible, productive conception of genre provides an attractive alternative. In "Genre as a Strategic Resource," Lemke builds on Frow's conception of genre. According to Lemke, "educators approach genre as a rule or a resource. Rules restrict, determine, and prescribe. Resources empower" (Lemke 1). Lemke's distinction between "genre as a rule or a resource" helps to clarify how Frow's understanding of genre differs from that of Derrida. Lemke differentiates the two approaches in these terms: "What distinguishes a rule from a resource is that a rule is given to the user, not to be altered by him or her, whereas a resource comes under the power of the user" (Lemke 1). Like Frow, Lemke believes genre can be perceived as rigid and restrictive (a rule) or dynamic and empowering (a resource). Unlike Frow, Lemke approaches genre as an educator, stressing the teaching or presentation of genre as a primary factor in the ways in which genre is understood by users. Rules are presented as untouchable ideals, while resources are presented as malleable instruments.

Lemke discusses possible explanations for why a genre like professional email might be particularly vulnerable to being taught as a rigid rule: "There are those who argue that the world is cruel and unjust and we must prepare students to make their way as best as they can. Genre conformity becomes either a necessary price to be paid for economic opportunity or perhaps a

weapon to be turned against its designers" (Lemke 4). In considering genre conformity as "a necessary price to be paid for economic opportunity," Lemke suggests that professional email has become a gateway to such a variety of opportunities that mastery of the genre is now widely considered mandatory for the "economic opportunity" made possible through professional success. As a result, professional email conventions might be taught with the pressure and specificity of a technical skill, resulting in "genre conformity." Students are sacrificing their individuality for security—sending the exact same email to the exact same bank recruiter as your big brother did two years ago is considered significantly less risky than drafting your own content. Alternatively, Lemke considers genre conformity as "a weapon to be turned against its designers." Through this lens, genre can be a tool for subversion. As I discuss in chapter two, this theory alludes to ways in which email senders creatively utilize strict genre conventions in ways that they find empowering.

I believe Frow's foundation and Lemke's language provide useful contexts for discussing contemporary anxiety surrounding professional email as a genre. Based on my interviews, I argue that the seemingly strict genre conventions of professional email cause students to experience anxiety about performing protocols. Since the birth of the business email, professional email conventions have begun to be perceived as hyper-rigid, depicting the professional email genre as a rule rather than a resource. In my own experiences, this feels especially true. Through friends, family, and professional workshops, I have been taught that there is a definitively correct way to write a professional email featuring a series of specific conventions. Lemke compares rule-like genres to tyrants: "If genre theory only provides us with normative rules that dictate how we must write to be acceptable for someone with the power to make their judgments matter to us, then genre merely mediates a semiotic tyranny" (Lemke 4).

Within this tyranny, "genre is a master, a system of rules demanding obedience, a tyrant" (Lemke 4). Although Lemke's statements intend to address all work within the realm of "genre theory," his words resonate as though he is describing professional email specifically. In my experiences, professional email correspondence often feels like performance, a dance of decorated buzzwords, dictated by "normative rules" and intended above all else to impress anonymous gatekeepers, job recruiters "with the power to make their judgements matter to us." In the case of professional email correspondence, genre functions exactly as the "tyrant" Lemke describes.

My interviewees and I seem to have learned professional email conventions from human resources, including friends, family members, and mentors. Matt, a male senior majoring in economics, reports, "I mostly learned [professional email conventions] from older people. Honestly, my older brother kind of went through the same [recruitment process]…and I would ask him 'How do I write this?'" Jennifer, a female senior majoring in business, also consults trusted individuals when she gets stuck with professional phrasing: "I'll go ask my friends 'Hey, how did you word this when you're looking for this thing from a recruiter or person?'" MJ, a male senior majoring in business, attributes his professional email-writing skillset to "professional mentors in an internship." When I personally want feedback on a professional email I have drafted, I call in my mom. So does Evan, a male senior majoring in economics: "I used to every time I had to send a professional email be like, 'Hey, Mom, how does this look?'"

Coupled with my own experiences, the experiences of Matt, Jennifer, MJ, and Evan attest to a larger trend in which people are teaching and learning professional email conventions to and from one another. With the exception of MJ's internship mentors, this learning seems to be occurring informally. This homemade education network suggests there are few formal,

centralized resources for learning professional email correspondence, or at least very few

effective ones. I originally selected a distribution of business and economics students to

interview because the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business requires its students to

take two business communication courses. Knowing business students have received some form

of structured business communication education, I hypothesized that these students would report

having more confidence during professional email correspondence than their peers studying

economics. However, my interviewees majoring in business rarely mentioned the influence of

these classes, titled "Introduction to Business Communication" and "Professional

Communication Strategies." Jennifer believes she learned only "a little" through her business

communication classes, while MJ cites the classes as an influence, but he qualifies, "The

[business communications] class is tough because it's hard to change a curriculum with a rapidly

evolving reality." MJ's comments imply the University's business communication courses are

outdated. As technology advances and new communication platforms emerge, creating a "rapidly

evolving reality," old platforms, such as email, are forced to find and reestablish their place in

the cultural moment. Perhaps for this instability, the Ross School of Business's professional

communication courses do not seem to prepare students to feel comfortable with professional

email correspondence. In the face of this educational vacuum, students are turning to one

another, as well as to trusted friends and family members, to learn the genre conventions of

professional email correspondence.

This lack of formal, centralized resources from which to learn professional email

conventions raises questions of accessibility. As Frow argues, genre "calls into play durable

social institutions, and the organization of physical space" (Frow 13). All students interact with

different networks of these institutions and spaces; they come from different families, live in

different cities, attend different schools, and select different concentrations. Many of these differences are influenced by factors such as race, gender, and class, that, for better or worse, affect students' accessibility to people who teach professional email conventions. Matt, Jennifer, MJ, Evan, and I all cited personal connections as the primary sources of our professional email educations. We also all identify as members of the middle to upper class. In a world where professional email conventions are primarily learned through other people, my white, well-educated mother puts me in a position of privilege when she is able to weigh in on the appropriateness of a subject line smiley face. This privilege may not be afforded to all students, yet current options such as the professional communication courses offered by the Ross School of Business do not provide greater access.

Unfortunately, the participants in professional email's informal education network seem to have internalized the genre as what Lemke would describe as a rule rather than a resource. My interview subjects constantly reference the strict conventions they must abide by and the dangers of going off-script. They describe the consequences of professional email errors as severe. MJ warns, "It takes ten years to build your reputation, a lifetime to build your reputation, and a second to destroy it, and I think email's the same way. You start making errors and people just automatically devalue and remember you for that. And it's permanent." MJ depicts the digital medium as stern and unforgiving, every bit the genre of Lemke's warning: "a master, a system of rules demanding obedience, a tyrant" (Lemke 4).

This "system of rules" is composed of professional email conventions, including a standard organizational structure, formal language, brevity, and enthusiasm. Discrepancies exist, but there seems to be general consensus amongst my interviewees surrounding these four conventions. Almost all of my interview subjects describe a standard organizational structure

they employ to draft professional emails. The concept of using a "structured template" to deal with a complex genre can reduce feelings of immediate anxiety but might ultimately quell authenticity. DewRina, MJ, Amol, and Evan emphasize the importance of an opening salutation and introduction, followed by some sort of background or "reason for emailing," and concluding with an expression of gratitude and closing salutation. Under pressure to abide by this strict structure, many students develop professional email "templates." MJ explains, "If you go to business school and you have someone telling you to do these things there's not a lot of thought involved, it's more like 'I have a template and I'm filling it in…what information can I use to fill in those variables?'" Amol, a male senior majoring in business, describes the similarity between student templates: "It's very structured…It's a very structured template, I think, where it doesn't vary too much." The students' professional email templates reduce the genre to Mad Libs, likely contributing to what Lemke describes as genre conformity. Demands of the template, designed to combat stress induced by rigid genre conventions, have the potential to trump students' more natural communication tendencies, conceivably creating an entirely new source of anxiety. MJ explains, "In regular emails it's much more organic and it feels like a regular conversation…I don't worry too much about my structure, it's just about getting the meaning across, but in [professional] email I think there's a set of rules that makes it inorganic." MJ compares his "organic" demeanor in "regular emails" to his "inorganic" demeanor in professional emails, suggesting that the professional email genre's structural conventions prevent writers from expressing themselves in an open, genuine manner. Additionally, MJ contrasts writing to accomplish a specific "structure" with writing to "[get] the meaning across," suggesting the two objectives are often at odds.

The genre of professional email is also characterized by formal language. Evan identifies such language as a defining feature of professional email: "It seem to be step one of writing professional emails is be professional, so I try to keep my language very, very professional." Evan immediately equates professionalism with formal language. He references formal language as a foundational element of professional email, emphasizing how important this convention is to the "authority" of the professional email within its genre. While differentiating professional email from other types of email correspondence, Amol explains, "[Professional email is] very much more formal. You got to know…can't use contractions, kind of the language you would never actually talk like that in real life." Many of my interview subjects affirm Amol's severe distinction between the formality of language used in professional emails and that used in everyday speech. DewRina, a female senior majoring in economics, confesses, "For me, [professional language] presents a lot of challenges. Just because I feel unnatural because this isn't the normal way I talk." DewRina's discomfort, fueled by professional email's demand for hyper-formal language, echoes MJ's concerns regarding authentic representation. Both students recognize disparities between the way they represent themselves via professional email versus that on a regular basis. DewRina feels this language is "unnatural," only heightening her anxiety in response to professional email's rigid genre conventions.

Upon completing interviews and reviewing transcripts, I was surprised that perhaps the most consistently mentioned convention of professional email was its brevity. Over and over again, students insisted on the importance of keeping their emails short and direct. Depicting her professional email recipients as busy and impatient, Alyssa instructs, "Don't be too long in your writing because they don't have time. They won't read it." Matt confirms, "[You should] respect their time because I know people are super busy, especially recruiters, so be straight to the point

and kind of cover everything in one email." Matt's recommendation that applicants simultaneously "be straight to the point" and "cover everything in one email" demonstrates the difficulty of packaging a substantial amount of important information into a single brief message. Furthermore, rather than suggest recruiters spend more time fielding applicants' emails, Matt puts the responsibility on email senders to "respect [recruiters'] time." This position suggests Matt might feel that he, as an applicant, is perceived as burdensome or onerous by recruiters. Similar testimonies suggest this perception of company representatives is widely shared, perhaps passed on through the human network of professional email instruction.

Much like professional email's structure and formal language, the genre's required brevity also causes students to feel anxious. Alyssa reiterates the challenges of packaging so much important information into such concise emails:

In the business world, you want to be as brief as possible so you don't lose someone's attention, and it's just really scary because a lot of the things you're asking in professional email is more than you would just be asking when you're emailing your dad something…Just a lot more anxiety around sending out professional emails than regular emails I would say.

Alyssa, like Matt, assumes responsibility for maintaining her professional email recipients' attention. She also repeats Matt's concern that the amount of time and attention she is "asking" for by sending a professional email is relatively great. These worries illustrate how students sending professional emails might feel they are embarrassingly burdensome or imposing. Alyssa draws an explicit link between these factors and her consequent anxiety.

Amol also addresses brevity-induced anxiety, but he approaches the convention from a different perspective. While other interviewees keep professional correspondences short to

maintain recruiters' attention, Amol worries that the more content he provides, the more opportunity there is for miscommunication:

> In email…you don't see instantaneously [recipients'] reaction to what you're saying so you can't qualify anything right away. So you have to be really, really concise with what you're saying in your email…and don't want to convey anything else…Whereas if I'm talking to someone, if I say something weird I can immediately qualify it, or if I see confusion or excitement I can go more about it, go less about it.

Amol compares professional email correspondence to verbal communication in order to communicate the former's limitations. Business etiquette expert Rosanne Thomas reports that in face-to-face interactions, 60% of communication is nonverbal, 30% is tone of voice, and 10% is words. When individuals communicate using only text, they therefore lose 90% of natural communicative signals, including specifically the cues used to offer feedback that Amol has picked up on (Thomas 98). Verbal communication offers Amol some flexibility—the immediate nature of the interaction allows him to recover more easily from failed conversational efforts and capitalize on successful ones. In contrast, professional email appears restrictive. Online, Amol is walking on eggshells.

The last professional email convention on which I will focus is expression of enthusiasm. Many of my interview subjects speak to the importance of demonstrating excitement to their professional email recipients. Matt discloses, "I think the biggest thing I always try to get across is that I'm excited about this opportunity…you really want to let them know that you're actually excited…so that's something that I always try to highlight." Matt's conviction that professional email recipients survey for applicants' enthusiasm suggests this is another convention he has been taught. Jennifer also feels strongly about conveying excitement via professional email;

however, she sometimes struggles to do so. Jennifer expresses difficulty articulating her excitement: "I think it's hard to signal excitement through words a lot of times so how I do it is really exclamation marks and timing." By timing, Jennifer means that she responds to emails quickly to convey her enthusiasm. Jennifer claims that "it's hard to signal excitement through words," but I disagree. For example, one might say, "I am excited!" So I believe Jennifer means that it is difficult to signal excitement through words specifically through the platform of professional email. Enthusiasm appears to be at odds with other professional email conventions, such as formal language and brevity, and students struggle to navigate the tension.

Professional email conventions such as organizational structure, formal language, brevity, and enthusiasm can cause email writers to experience anxiety about performing protocols, sometimes leading students to feel that the genre prevents them from expressing themselves authentically. To make matters more complicated, students often face simultaneous pressure to differentiate themselves. While abiding to an unwritten rulebook of subjective standards, one must also establish themselves as different from dozens of other students muddling recruiters' mailboxes. Applicants might attempt to balance demand to stand out with efforts to fit in, proving they can talk the talk without talking the talk that everyone else is talking. Matt describes the challenge of fusing standardized phrases with personal touches: "So you always want to say 'Thanks for reaching out' if they reach out to you or a little bit of spice with an exclamation point, but not too much because then it gets kind of weird." I asked him to elaborate on "spice":

> So in terms of spice, it's like you want to be formal so you don't want to have too much
> exclamation marks or anything, but you also want to let them know you're not a robot so
> in doing these phrases that you should say like "Thank you for reaching out" exclamation

point, you don't want to over-do it and be kind of weird about it, but you also need those, especially if you're touching on something that you talked about in a previous conversation. I guess you just want to keep it not robotic. There are all things you should say but you can't have everything be the exact same as every other email.

Matt twice alludes to the unwritten rulebook of professional email, referencing phrases he feels he "should" say. His allegiance to this unsponsored etiquette reveals how difficult it is to successfully differentiate one's self within such rigid boundaries. He must go far enough to demonstrate "spice," to prove he is "not robotic," but the consequences of stepping too far out of bounds are being perceived as "weird," a classification he can likely not come back from. Alternatively, not stepping out enough produces an email "the exact same as every other email," also landing him nowhere. Matt uses exclamation points, well-established but vaguely alternative punctuation marks, as tools to strike this delicate balance. MJ's efforts to differentiate himself are extremely similar to those of Matt. MJ employs nearly identical language to describe his difficulties:

I always struggle with wanting to be personable but knowing this is a business email and these are professionals and I have to contain myself. Seriously, I want to use an exclamation mark here to be nice and personable, but will they think it's weird? Will they think less of me because I'm writing friendly versus direct emails?

Like Matt, MJ searches desperately for the balance between "personable" and "weird," ultimately settling on exclamation points. He also articulates the convention's suppression of his personality: "I have to contain myself." Both students' testimonies illustrate anxiety generated by not only rigid genre conventions but also the combination of rigid genre conventions with pressures to perform individuality.

While Matt and MJ use exclamation points in an effort to showcase some personality, it is also worth noting that both students identify as financially secure white men. This truth begs questions of accessibility—which students can afford to bend conventions? In August 2017, *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* published a study in which researchers chose to focus on how an email sender's gender, sending method, and closing salutation affects the recipient's perception of the sender's professionalism, competence, and positive or negative affect (Marlow 3). 288 participants evaluated identical emails that varied only in these independent variables (Marlow 6). Statistical analyses of the results reveal that, on average, females were viewed as more professional than males when sending business emails. However, females were viewed as less professional when closing their emails with "Thanks!" while males did not experience the same effect (Marlow 9). The article's authors hypothesize that women are viewed as less professional when using the closing salutation "Thanks!" because its exclamation point might elicit "negative female stereotypes" (Marlow 12). Such stereotypes present women as over-expressive or emotional, qualities often perceived as undesirable in a professional setting. In short, MJ and Matt's race, gender, and financial status might have granted them the comfort and confidence necessary to push the boundaries of rigid conventions in ways that other demographics are unable to.

Issues of accessibility illustrate yet another challenge presented by professional email's generic conventions. As evidenced by students' struggles with professional email's organizational structure, formal language, brevity, and enthusiasm, these conventions prove especially problematic when the genre is perceived as rigid and restrictive,.

Chapter 2

Professional Email Implications: Insiders, Outsiders, and Agency

Before even beginning my interview with DewRina, the chatty economics major patiently walked me through the pronunciation of her first name. "I know it's a little weird, but my dad made it up so don't even ask," she laughed. In friendly conversation, DewRina seems to embrace her name as a quirky anomaly, a reminder of her close family, but in professional contexts, things take a turn for the stressful. When emailing company recruiters, DewRina confesses, "I almost do have that feeling that I am below everyone else when I type my name. I'm like, 'Well they definitely know I'm not American, they know I'm Asian.'" DewRina fears that her name reveals her ethnicity, putting her at a disadvantage. Her anxiety reveals only one of the ways in which professional email interactions affect certain demographics differently than others, raising questions of access and equality. In this chapter, I apply standpoint theory to explore the ways in which the white, male, and upper-class world of business filters insiders from outsiders on the basis of demographic factors. Students also recount ways in which the reductive nature of professional emails makes non-dominant identities both more and less visible. In the face of these obstacles, student applicants harness creative ways to gain agency, both in and outside of professional email's generic framework.

Through jargon, dress codes, and public LinkedIn profiles, the professional world is a place of insiders and outsiders. College-age job applicants entering the workforce for the first time are already easily visible outsiders, and this status can be magnified by variances in race, gender, and class. In American business, especially business ownership and management, the norm is white, male, and upper-class. The United States Census Bureau estimates that African

Americans, Latinos, Asians, and other ethnicities compose over 38% of the nation's population; however, in 2014, only 17.5% of operating businesses were owned by people of color (Soergel). Similarly, women comprise over 50% of the nation's population, but in 2014, only 19.4% of all operating businesses were women-owned (Soergel). Furthermore, Catalyst, a global nonprofit focused on increasing corporate female leadership, reports that women currently hold just 5.4% of CEO positions at S&P 500 companies ("Women CEOs"), the 500 largest companies with common stock listed on the world's largest stock exchanges. In short, people of color and women own and lead disproportionately fewer businesses than their white, male counterparts. Due to their statistical underrepresentation, people of color, women, and lower-class individuals can feel they do not fully belong in the world of business and may experience business happenings differently than their white, male, upper-class colleagues do.

I believe standpoint theory provides a productive lens through which to examine professional email correspondence and the greater business dynamics for which they stand. Standpoint theory deals with the subjectivity of experiences, exploring the ways in which different tiers of belonging affect perspective. Feminist philosopher Nancy Harstock introduces modern standpoint theory in "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing Ground for Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," published in 1983. Her ideas draw from the writings of German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx (Harstock 12). Critics claim that standpoint theory is essentialist, reducing the diverse, intersectional experiences of different demographic groups to make broad generalizations (Harding 63). Although I recognize how standpoint theory might facilitate the oversimplification of identities, I have avoided such pitfalls by engaging deeply with my interview participants, accounting for each multi-dimensional individual's respective complexities and wide range of experiences.

Standpoint theory identifies three categories of community members: insiders, outsiders, and outsiders-within. (Rios 296). Insiders possess identities, qualities, or credentials that put them in the numerical majority and therefore most dominant group. Insiders' experiences and perspectives are "validated" more often those of other groups; their perception is understood to be the norm (Rios 296). Because white men own and lead disproportionately more businesses than their non-white and female counterparts, they function as insiders in American business. At the other end of the spectrum, outsiders are community members who share very few qualities with members of the dominant group (Rios 296). In American business, a woman of color with no business background might function as an outsider.

My research primarily focuses on standpoint theory's third category of community member: outsiders-within, who exist somewhere between insiders and outsiders. For their research about women and minorities in STEM fields, Desdamona Rios and Abigail J. Stewart explore this more nuanced position: "The term outsider-within describes people operating within an environment without fully fitting into it (Collins, 1999). At the same time, majority group members in the same context are likely to perceive minority group members as belonging, despite the subjective experiences of those in the minority" (Rios 297). Outsiders-within feel they do not or cannot ever "fully" integrate with the dominant group, often due to differences in identity. Rios and Stewart continue, "For outsiders-within, inclusion does not necessarily translate to a sense of belonging, equal power, or influence within a particular context" (Rios 297). Outsiders-within are insiders on paper, but their everyday reality is much more complex. Because dominant group members often believe outsiders-within to belong, the dominant group members can be oblivious to such insecurities or differences in perspective. In business, outsiders-within include people of color, women, lower class individuals, and essentially

anybody else who works in business without entirely fitting the white, male, and upper-class norm. Of my interview participants, only Matt and MJ identify as white, male, and upper-to-middle class individuals, or traditional business insiders. Conversely, DewRina, Jennifer, Evan, Amol, Alyssa, and I function more as outsiders-within, sharing some demographic qualities with traditional business insiders but remaining unable to integrate completely.

Together, outsiders and outsiders-within compose the "minority" group, while insiders compose the "majority" group. Extensive psychological research corroborates standpoint theory's assertion that minority and majority group members experience environments differently, affecting individuals' "sense of fit" (Rios 297). For example, minority group members are prone to be viewed through negative stereotypes, which can weaken the performance and motivation of their subjects (Rios 297). As a Korean woman hoping to work in business, female economics major DewRina fears facing stereotypes from job recruiters:

> I feel like they almost have this belief that 'She's a female, she's probably not that great in this field. I mean look at all these workers here—they're all men. Obviously they must be better or something.' I feel like maybe not straight up that's what they think but in the back of their head maybe that's what they're thinking. And so it gives me a bit of 'Man I feel bad about this,' but at the same time I can't do anything about my ethnicity and chromosomes, so it is what it is. I'm going to try my best and if I can't get in I did my best so I can't complain.

DewRina and I did not discuss standpoint theory, but her language echoes many of its concepts. First, DewRina recognizes that in the context of business, her gender puts her in the numerical minority. As a female, she cannot be a business insider. She acknowledges that these stereotypes are likely not held explicitly, but rather subconsciously, affirming standpoint theory's tenet that

majority group members are often unaware of the ways in which minority members fear being perceived. Ultimately, DewRina accepts her position, conceding that all she can do is try her best. Rios and Stewart state that "Members of underrepresented groups often feel the need to consistently perform at a higher level than men or white people to disprove incompetence or establish themselves as legitimate authorities in the field" (Rios 298). Instead of challenging the tipped scales of the system, DewRina takes a pragmatic, realistic approach to her undeserved disadvantage.

DewRina's resignation to negative stereotypes is similar to that of Amol, who identifies as male and Indian. Amol worries that his professional email recipients might see his name and assume he does not speak English very well, but like DewRina, he expresses little frustration: "I think snap judgements are by everyone about everyone. That being said, I generally don't see it as a problem…[My name] is so different people don't know what to think but I don't blame people for that, it's just a sheer lack of exposure." DewRina and Amol acknowledge a number of negative stereotypes due to the characteristics that make them outsiders, but the students appear largely unshaken.

While outsiders and outsiders-within struggle with negative stereotypes, Rios and Stewart acknowledge the potential for desirable elements of outsider status as well. Rios and Stewart report, "Researchers also suggest lack of fit may be compensated by a complementary relationship between persons and their organization…if people perceive their difference to be desirable and valued" (Rios 298). Although minority group members suffer from their "lack of fit," they might accept such suffering if the differentiation pays off in other ways. For example, DewRina grapples with both the challenges and opportunities presented to her as a woman of color who may work in banking:

I do realize that my last name Lee is the most common Korean last name and I realize

that a lot of companies do look into these things. Actually, this bank has this program or

this, not an exception, but that's what I'm going to call it, where they look for a lot more

females in the minority group…so I feel like sometimes it could actually be an

advantage, but other times I do feel like in an industry that is very men-driven like STEM

fields I almost do have that feeling that I am below everyone else when I type my name.

DewRina points out that her minority status might be an "advantage" in instances when

programs make conscious efforts to improve company diversity; however, she refers to these

programs as "exceptions." Her word choice implies that such programs have only reinforced

DewRina's understanding of women and people of color in business as a deviation from the

status quo. Nevertheless, DewRina's experience points to one of the ways in which aspiring

professionals who are outsiders-within navigate stereotypes.

DewRina and Amol's mutual fear of being stereotyped on the basis of their names

illustrates how professional email can magnify non-dominant identities. The suffocating

conventions of professional email correspondence leave little room for applicants to showcase

personal qualities, so they risk being reduced to features that can be inferred by nonverbal cues,

such as names. As a result, professional email creates an interesting dichotomy, making non-

dominant identities hyper-visible in some instances and invisible in others. In the cases of

DewRina and Amol, their non-dominant identities are amplified by untraditional names.

DewRina worries that her name will expose her as a woman of color. She imagines recruiters

concluding, "She's a female, she's probably not that great in this field," causing her to confess to

"feeling that I am below everyone else when I type my name." Jennifer articulates similar

anxieties: "Sometimes I'm concerned that with an Asian last name people will expect certain

things from you…or have preconceived notions and stereotypes." Amol, DewRina, and Jennifer remain wary of what professional email recipients will read into their names. At the very least, these names might expose them as business outsiders. At worst, they attach the applicants to a larger network of stereotypes and judgements.

The students' concerns are not at all unfounded. Many researchers have explored the ways in which gendered and racialized recipient names affect how emails are read, and the results are unsettling. For example, we can return to the *Business and Professional Communication Quarterly* article from August 2017, in which researchers sent out identical emails, some of which varied only in the gender of the senders' names (Marlow 6). The study revealed that, on average, females were viewed as more professional than males when sending business emails (Marlow 9). However, females were viewed as less professional when closing their emails with "Thanks!" because the exclamation point tends to elicit "negative female stereotypes" (Marlow 12). Males, however, were not viewed as less professional when using the closing salutation "Thanks!" Such stereotypes position women as over-expressive or emotional, qualities that tend to be viewed as undesirable in a professional setting. Unfortunately, these stereotypes have remained fairly prevalent. Even MJ discloses, "I think that whether I would admit it or not, I probably treat women that I email more warmly and personally because I feel like that…I probably just do for whatever reason…while with men I'm typically more professional and less warm." MJ's "warm" treatment of women might suggest he endorses the same "female stereotypes" described in the previous study, believing women to be more emotional than men. MJ's reaction confirms that professional email's ability to amplify non-dominant identity elements has real consequences in regards to the ways we interact with one another.

Similar experiments explore the effects of racialized names as opposed to gendered names. For example, in September 2017, *The New York Times* published a research study in which 20,000 emails were sent to local government employees in nearly every county (Wolfers). Justin Wolfers reports, "The emails were identical except that half appeared to come from a DeShawn Jackson or a Tyrone Washington, names that have been shown to be associated with African-Americans. The other half used names that have been shown to be associated with whites: Greg Walsh and Jake Mueller" (Wolfers). Ultimately, emails sent with black-sounding signatures were 13% more likely to go unanswered than those sent with white-sounding signatures. The study suggests email senders can be stereotyped and treated differently on the basis of identities assigned according to nonverbal cues such as names.

Although such nonverbal email cues can trigger stereotypes, they actually prove to be extremely unreliable indicators of identity. Professional email's reductive nature acts as a double-edged sword: just as it makes some non-dominant identities hyper-visible, it allows others to go unseen Such cues might emphasize the non-dominant identity traits of those with certain characteristics while completely concealing the non-dominant identity traits of others who "pass." Award-winning author Marcia Dawkins defines "passing" as "the 'fact of being accepted, or representing oneself successfully, as a member of a different' group. Generally speaking, passing refers to the means by which nonwhite people represent themselves as white" (Dawkins 1). While other scholars depict passing as an antiquated practice, a "historical artifact," Dawkins argues that the practice has recently been revived by a "passing renaissance" beginning in the 1990s (Dawkins 2). Passing in the world of business would mean for an outsider or outsider-within to present themselves as possessing the demographic qualities of an insider.

Whether those who pass do so intentionally or not, professional email can facilitate the process.

MJ describes a personal experience with passing:

> I've been working with this guy as I mentioned, never face-to-face, for the past two
> months, and then I had to Google a picture of him for a presentation, and it turns out
> he's…I want to say Korean or Chinese, and I had always just envisioned him as just a 30-
> year-old white guy…I don't know why it was surprising to me but it was surprising…He
> didn't sound different…So I assumed he was white because he spoke like I spoke.

Nothing suggests MJ's correspondent was attempting to misrepresent himself, but regardless of his intentions, he did successfully pass. MJ's conscious surprise indicates that his email recipient's demographic qualities are not negligible, in which case this discovery would be less remarkable to MJ. Instead, the man's race seems to matter to MJ, enforcing the likelihood that race informs the way we read professional emails. Furthermore, MJ's assumption that his correspondent was white because "he spoke like [MJ] spoke" reveals that MJ considers his own communication habits to be a standard and norm, meaning that MJ seems to believe the way he communicates is the correct way to do so, and others who communicate the same way are also business insiders. MJ's assumption suggests that professional email correspondents are believed to be business insiders until they actively demonstrate that they are not, further facilitating the possibility of passing. For example, lower-class applicants without the educational access or opportunities of their upper-class counterparts can pass as business insiders via professional email as long as they master the genre conventions and write using Standard English. Professional email's ability to amplify and mask non-dominant identities illustrates another means by which the medium both generates anxiety and poses additional challenges to outsiders and outsiders-within.

In response to professional email's generic challenges, including rigid conventions, facilitation of stereotyping, and amplification of non-dominant identity traits, my interview subjects highlighted creative ways in which they gain agency, both in and outside of professional email's generic framework. Within the confines of professional email conventions, students capitalized on the genre's organizational structure, brevity, and non-immediate nature to propel themselves forward. Students recognized that although the genre's strict organizational structure might repress authenticity, it also lends itself to seamless replication. Professional email's nearly standardized structure means students can write a single email to be used and re-used many times over, reducing their workload. Alyssa recounts, "The first few [emails] were hard but then it just gets easier because you kind of start to use it almost like a template." Amol agrees: "Getting that structure worked out took about an hour and then every additional email after that took way less time because…the overall structure stayed the same." Both student applicants tap into organizational conventions that alleviate rather than induce their anxiety.

Student applicants also manage to take advantage of professional email's brevity. As touched upon in chapter one, Amol believes that the less content he includes in a professional email, the less opportunity there is for miscommunication. If this is the case, professional email's characteristic brevity allows Amol to be as clear and confident as possible. Jennifer Parlamis, an associate professor at the University of San Francisco's School of Management, designed a study for which she "asked participants to engage in simulated business negotiations over email. The successful pairs of negotiators tended to take advantage of the strengths of email," including the ability to "convey a lot of information in clear, specific form" (Blackman). Like Amol, the study's highest performing participants derive value from brevity.

The non-immediate nature of professional email correspondence also offers opportunity for agency. When I asked interview subjects if they would prefer to have a professional conversation via phone or email, several selected email, explaining that the medium allows more time and privacy for preparation. DewRina resents the formality of professional email, but she believes the tradeoffs are worth it: "I would prefer email [to the phone] because I get that extra time to re-read and make sure I'm being precise, concise…Also, email you know for sure they got everything, it's written and they can pull it up again." DewRina finds comfort and security in the ability to perfect her communication and refer back to it. By using professional email conventions to their advantages, my interview subjects exemplify Lemke's conception of genre as a resource. In these instances, the structure, brevity, and non-immediate nature of professional email are not perceived as restrictive rules but rather as empowering instruments.

Student applicants are also harnessing agency outside of professional email's generic framework, especially through participation in identity-based organizations. These students are shaping new business communities on their own terms, providing students with educational resources, professional connections, and a sense of belonging. Identity-based business organizations can expose outsiders and outsiders-within to business worlds in which they fully fit in, instilling both comfort and confidence. For example, Amol acts as a peer mentor for the University of Michigan Asians in Business club, while DewRina details her participation in a number of female and Asian empowerment groups. Alyssa describes her experiences as the Vice President of Corporate Relations for MBW, Michigan Business Women. She describes MBW as "both a social club and a professional club. We have a lot of internal events like a monthly mass meeting…but we also host recruiting events." Alyssa believes her participation in a female-only business organization has been invaluable:

It's incredible because when I was going through recruiting I used a lot of the women, like older mentors, and you could reach out to anybody and I find that women are very willing to help you out. Even just having these networking events with just women are a lot less scary, especially for people going into finance. When you're going to the Morgan Stanley corporate presentation it's 90% boys and 10% girls and you do feel overpowered, but in this space you don't because it's all females.

Alyssa expresses a higher level of comfort when contacting businesswomen, those members of a male-dominated field who share her non-dominant identity trait. Scholars primarily use standpoint theory to draw lines between the experiences of those in different groups; however, these lines simultaneously highlight shared experiences between group members. Identity-based organization members like Alyssa might attempt to capitalize on these similarities. Alyssa's identity-based business organization provides her with a context in which she has a "sense of belonging, equal power, or influence" within the larger world of business, granting her the comfort and confidence necessary to begin leveling the playing field.

In short, professional email poses a number of generic challenges, including rigid conventions, facilitation of stereotyping, and amplification of non-dominant identity traits, many of which disproportionately affect underrepresented applicants such as people of color, women, and lower-class individuals. Resilient student applicants are already crafting creative and self-empowering responses to these problems, but I believe more can be done to help on their behalf.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I argue that professional email participants' anxiety and resourcefulness demonstrate both a desire and attempt to change professional email correspondence to a more accessible, empowering means of communication. I believe that in order to transition professional email from an anxiety-inducing obligation (rule) to an empowering instrument (resource), we must change the way professional email is taught. As addressed in chapter one, my interviewees and I seem to have largely learned profession email conventions from human resources, including friends, family members, and mentors. This homemade education network suggests there are few formal, centralized resources for learning professional email conventions. I believe the American business community requires a more standardized system to teach less standardized email practices. As a result, I am proposing the creation of an open education resource featuring J.L. Lemke's generic teachings, as applied specifically to professional email correspondence.

To increase the accessibility of professional email education, I advocate for the creation of an open educational resource, or OER. An OER is an online education tool used to provide "digitized materials offered freely and openly for educators, students and self-learners to use and reuse for leaching, learning and research" (OECD 10). The Centre for Educational Research and Innovation explains, "The two most important aspects of openness have to do with free availability over the Internet and as few restrictions as possible on the use of the resource, whether technical, legal or price barriers" (OECD 32). The open nature of OERs would dramatically increase the accessibility of a professional email education. It would not matter if applicants were business majors, economics majors, or college students at all—ideally, everyone

would have access to these tutorials. As our lives move increasingly online, OERs offer a compelling alternative to more traditional and expensive education channels. In fact, many mainstream educators are integrating OERs into live classrooms—I cannot count the number of times an instructor has recommended, or even assigned, a Kahn Academy video to myself and fellow students. Kahn Academy, debatably one of the world's most famous OERs, offers free, online courses ranging from trigonometry to art history. The website's front page assures, "You can learn anything. For free. For everyone. Forever" (*Kahn Academy).* The front page also solicits donations, as the not-for-profit organization runs entirely on donors and volunteers (*Kahn Academy*). While the creation of an OER will likely have some expenses, these will not nearly compare to those of the scale of a system like Kahn Academy. Furthermore, the development of an effective OER for professional email correspondence, for which there seems to be ample demand and little supply, offers an opportunity for tremendous publicity for the organization to soonest and most successfully create such a resource. As a result, I believe the resource's costs would likely be compensated with recognition.

To improve the flexibility of professional email correspondence, I believe this open educational resource must draw directly from J.L. Lemke's distinction between genre as a rule versus that as a resource. Lemke urges his readers to recognize the difference:

> What distinguishes a rule from a resource is that a rule is made by another, is enforced by the power of that other, and cannot be effectively criticized or changed unless that power, and not just the rule itself, is challenged. A rule is a *given*, but a resource is something that has been fully *given* to us: it comes under the power of the user, it can be used or not, abused or not, flaunted or not, changed or not, as the user finds useful. (Lemke 5)

When genre functions as a rule, the power belongs to its audience, but when genre functions as a resource, the power belongs to its user. By stressing the importance of genre's malleability, Lemke literally empowers genre users. I believe Lemke's argument for genre as a resource is essential for reframing the conversation on professional email correspondence. To reduce anxiety, email writers must grasp their own agency.

An open educational resource focused on Lemke's generic teachings cannot address all of the problematic components of professional email correspondence, nor the greater societal issues which they embody. Nevertheless, I maintain that this resource would serve as a productive first step towards reducing professional email anxiety through the empowerment of professional email writers. In fact, this entire thesis might be framed as only a productive first step in this direction. I recognize that my research is limited by its small sample size. Given more time and resources, I would have loved to engage with a larger selection of professional email participants from a wider variety of backgrounds. I also would have been interested in talking to both business communication professors as well as company recruiters, the individuals behind the curtains. For if we all look beyond our screens, resumes, and demographic lines, I believe there is a tremendous amount of good to be done here. The creativity, resilience, and enthusiasm revealed throughout this research gives an anxious email writer some hope.

Appendix A: Economics Interview Advertisement

Hello,

My name is Lucy Aaron, and I am a senior completing my Honors English thesis. I am contacting you about participating in an interview to contribute to my research. Each interview will be about an hour long and participants will be compensated with a $25 Visa gift card.

My thesis centers on personal branding and professional email, specifically how students feel when drafting professional emails and where they are learning email conventions. I am looking for seniors majoring in economics or business who are comfortable discussing their experiences and/or education concerning professional email correspondence.

If you are interested, please contact me at lucyrose@umich.edu to discuss your participation. Thank you so much, and please reach out with any questions!

Best,

Lucy

Appendix B: Business Interview Advertisement

Paid Research Opportunity!

Hi,

My name is Lucy, and I'm a senior completing my Honors English thesis. I am looking for seniors majoring in business who are comfortable discussing their experiences concerning professional email correspondence to participate in an interview to contribute to my research. Each interview will be about an hour long and participants will be compensated with a $25 Visa gift card.

If you are interested, please contact me at lucyrose@umich.edu to discuss your participation.

Thank you so much, and please reach out with any questions!

Appendix C: Pre-Interview Survey

1. What is your first and last name?

[   ]

2. What is your uniqname?

[   ]

3. What is your gender?

○ Female

○ Male

Other (please specify)

[   ]

4. What is your race/ethnicity?

○ White   ○ Native American or American Indian

○ Hispanic or Latino   ○ Asian/Pacific Islander

○ Black or African American

Other (please specify)

[   ]

5. How would you describe your social class?

○ Upper class   ○ Lower middle; "working"

○ Upper middle   ○ Lower

○ Middle

Other (please specify)

[   ]

Appendix D: Guiding Interview Questions

Background

- Tell me a little about yourself.

- What are you studying? Why did you choose to study this?

- What else are you involved with on campus?

- Is there a gender you identify with?

- Is there a race you identify with?

- How would you classify your social class?

- Is there anything else you believe I should know about you?

Email-writing

- What do you use email for?

- In your experiences, how is professional emailing similar to or different from other types of emails?

- In your experiences, how is professional email writing similar to or different from other types of professional writing, such as cover letters and resumes?

- Where and how have you learned to write professional emails?

- In your experiences how is professional emailing similar to or different from professional phone calls, or speaking with someone in person?
    - Is there a means of professional correspondence that you prefer, or are most comfortable with? Why?

- What does your professional email writing process look like?

- What does your professional email writing process feel like?

- What are some of the genre conventions, or "rules," you've come to learn about professional emailing?

- What factors do you believe affect how your email is read, or interpreted?

- What are you trying to communicate about yourself to a potential employer in a professional email, both directly and indirectly?

- To what extent, if at all, do you try to imagine the identity of your professional email recipient?

- To what extent, if at all, do you try to imagine the personality of your professional email recipient?

Identity/Branding

- Are you familiar with the term personal branding?

    o If so, where did you first hear of personal branding?

- Are there ways in which you position yourself differently for different types of opportunities?

- How do you feel about the professional application process?

- Are there any ways you would change the professional application process?

    o Why or why not? If so, how?

- Do you feel you belong, or "fit into" the business world? Why or why not?

- When you're engaging in professional emailing, to what extent, if at all, do you worry about being stereotyped on the basis of _____?

    o Why or why not?

- Are you ever conscious of other stereotypes related to your gender, race, or class when corresponding via professional email?

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