**A Comparison of Library Reference Services - Is There a Difference?**

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### Introduction

In an effort to better inform libraries about user preferences, this study compares the usability of five types of reference support services offered by an academic library (Jackson Library at UNCG) – telephone, instant messaging (online chat), email, Skype video conferencing, and text messaging. Usability is measured using the factors of efficiency and effectiveness, while also assessing patron satisfaction across each of the reference service modalities. This study further aims to determine if user satisfaction is dependent upon the type of question asked when using one particular reference service over another. We believe this may be the largest comparative study of virtual reference of its kind.

### Review of the Literature

In reviewing the literature, it is notable that there are no consistent results across studies regarding user preferences and satisfaction across a variety of reference modalities. In addition, there is very little research currently available which includes comparative data including text/SMS and video reference services. Presented below are two major studies related to the topic of user preferences of library reference services.

**Washington State University Survey Study**

In a survey study of students, faculty and staff (n=1297) across two campuses of Washington State University, researchers found that when requiring assistance from the library from outside of the library building, users ranked their first choice for seeking library assistance as shown in the table below (Cummings, Cummings, & Frederiksen, 2007).

**South Atlantic Region Survey Study**

In a survey study of students and faculty (n=276) at two four-year public universities in the South Atlantic Region of the United States, respondents listed their first choice for seeking reference help with a research project as shown in the table below (Johnson, 2004).

### Study Methodology

The study is being conducted in three phases at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a large public university with a student population of approximately 18,500.

**Phase 1:** A randomly selected group of undergraduates (n=16) and graduate students (n=19) was asked to contact the university library using five different virtual reference services and ask two pre-assigned questions (a quick, factual question and a procedural question). Subjects completed online surveys of their experiences – rating usability and satisfaction. Preferences of reference formats were ranked at the completion of the study.

**Phase 2:** An online survey invitation was sent to a randomly selected group of university students (n=2552) with a 9.4% (362) response rate as well as to all permanent faculty and staff of UNCG (n=3840) with a 21.6% (551) response rate. The completion rate among respondents was 89% (813). Each respondent was asked to answer questions about their awareness of, prior experience with, and preferences for using both face-to-face and virtual reference services available at the university library. Respondents rated their preferences for using the various reference services when asking a quick, factual question as well as a more detailed procedural question.

**Phase 3:** Reference librarians at UNCG’s Jackson Library will be asked to complete an online survey about their preferences for and the usability of different types of library reference services. Reference staff will also participate in a focus group during which they will be asked to share their thoughts and preferences surrounding virtual reference, as well as predict future trends.

### Results

**Results (Continued)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ranked as First Choice for Seeking Reference Assistance When Asking a Quick, Factual Question</th>
<th>Ranked as First Choice for Seeking Reference Assistance When Asking a Procedural Question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Email: 7.1% (1)</td>
<td>Email: 7.1% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone: 7.1% (1)</td>
<td>Telephone: 7.1% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Chat: 7.1% (10)</td>
<td>Online Chat: 7.1% (10)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skype Video: 0% (0)</td>
<td>Skype Video: 0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text Messaging: 14.3% (2)</td>
<td>Text Messaging: 14.3% (2)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Phase 2: Survey respondents ranked email reference (42.1% (336)) as a first choice if needing reference assistance for a research project. However, survey respondents ranked telephone reference (38.7% (296)) as their first choice when needing the answer to a quick, factual question. |

**Results (Continued)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 2: Face-to-Face Consultation is First Choice of Reference Service for Research Project Over All Virtual Formats</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase 2: (913 respondents to campus wide survey)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students prefer online chat (71.4% (10)) for virtual seeking assistance with research questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• If face-to-face consultation is available, students choose online chat (46.2% (6)) over all other reference formats.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Conclusions

**Phase 1:** (Direct usability testing by 15 students)

- Students prefer online chat (71.4% (10)) for virtual seeking assistance for research questions.
- Students prefer online chat (71.4% (10)) for virtual seeking assistance with research questions.
- If given a choice, nearly half of all Phase 2 survey respondents would choose face-to-face consultation when seeking assistance on a research project over all other formats.

**Phase 2:**

- Survey respondents (42.1% (336)) prefer email for virtual assistance for quick, factual questions.
- Survey respondents (38.7% (296)) prefer telephone for virtual assistance for research questions.
- Overall, survey respondents prefer face-to-face consultation over all other formats when seeking assistance with a research question.

**Phase 3:**

- Preliminary data suggest students prefer online chat for all types of questions.
- Faculty and staff prefer face-to-face consultation when seeking reference assistance.
- Differences between Phase 1 and Phase 2 appear to be due to the fact that Phase 1 included students, whereas the majority of respondents in Phase 2 were faculty and staff (60% (551)).

**Quote from Phase 1 Participant:** “Chat is super-simple and since its right on the library’s Web page I can access it very quickly. E-mail allows me to work on other things while waiting for an answer. I am better when I can read answers to my questions so the telephone is not the best choice for me. Texting is okay but unless I save the number to my phone it’s easier just to im. Skypeing is just bulky and annoying.”

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**Endnotes:**