

## OPENING E-MAIL MARKETING MESSAGES ON SMARTPHONES: THE VIEWS OF MILLENNIAL CONSUMERS

Belem Barbosa<sup>1</sup>, Ricardo Carneiro<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** Recent years have witnessed a steep rise in the adoption of smartphones and their prevalence in all the activities related to internet browsing. Consequently, mobile devices should be essential to any digital marketing strategy. At the same time, some digital marketing tactics such as e-mail marketing became popular due to their reported efficacy and return on investment. Still, research on e-mail marketing is scarce and consumers' behavior towards e-mail campaigns received on their smartphones has not been addressed. Considering this research gap, the present study aims at identifying the factors responsible for opening promotional emails on the smartphones by millennial consumers. Based on the available literature on e-mail marketing message opening behavior, an exploratory study was conducted among 12 Portuguese Millennials. Results of the study show that smartphones are a preferred medium for receiving promotional e-mails, due to the convenience it offers and the preference of the participants for their smartphones to perform their personal tasks. Still, to make the users open e-mail messages on their smartphones, the subject lines should be relevant for e.g., it should promise some economic benefits and limited time offers. Overall, this study demonstrates that smartphones provide a very attractive yet challenging medium for companies to communicate with their customers and prospects through e-mail marketing. It also discusses the relevance of the topic for future research.

**JEL Classification Numbers:** M31; **DOI:** <https://doi.org/peb.v3.285>

**Keywords:** e-mail marketing, millennials, mobile devices.

### Introduction

The recent report on global digitalization published by We Are Social (2022) shows continuous growth in mobile device adoption rate, which was increased by 1.8% in 2021 adding 95 million new mobile users. Mobile internet access is also rising, as 92.1% of the internet users' access the internet on their mobile phones. In fact, since the third quarter of 2019, mobile phones have accounted for more than half of the time spent online (We Are Social, 2022). On an average, internet users spent four hours and forty-eight minutes per day on smartphone in 2021, with 43% of this time dedicated to social and communication activities.

Reading an e-mail or a newsletter from a brand is one of the five most common online interactions with brands and is done by 20.9% of internet users aged between 16-64 years (We Are Social, 2022). These numbers alone highlight the importance of e-mail marketing in facilitating consumer-brand interactions. Consequently, e-mail marketing is one of the most popular marketing tactics to approach customers and prospects (Bharta, 2020; Hartemo, 2021; Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021), and apparently, one of the most profitable digital marketing tactics with the highest return on investment compared to others (Chaffey & Smith, 2017; Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021; Rosário, 2021).

Surprisingly, research on e-mail marketing is very scarce, especially after the adoption of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) initiated in 2016. For instance, till early 2022, in the Web of Science Core Collection, out of 35, only 29 articles were based on "e-mail marketing". Notably, 12 of those publications were from 2017-2021. This clearly underlines that this research topic has been gaining importance in recent years.

Based on the relevance of the research to help managers better implement this essential marketing tactic and consider the importance of mobile devices in internet usage, the study aims to identify the factors responsible for the opening of e-mail marketing messages on smartphones by millennial consumers. Millennials are individuals born between 1981 and 1996 (Dimock, 2019). Unlike the previous generation, they do not need to adapt to technology, as is the case with the internet, since they have always used it (Barbosa, Filipe, & Simões, 2018). Moreover, they are currently the most relevant consumer segment, being aged between 27 and 41, they are the focus of many businesses around the world (Tighe, 2022), and they stand out in several online activities; for instance, they are the generation with the maximum number of online shoppers (Samala & Singh, 2018). Therefore, they are considered

<sup>1</sup> Research Unit on Governance, Competitiveness, and Public Policies (GOVCOPP), Center for Economics and Finance at the University of Porto (cef.up), School of Economics and Management, University of Porto, Portugal, [marketing.belem@gmail.com](mailto:marketing.belem@gmail.com), ORCID: 0000-0002-4057-360X

<sup>2</sup> University of Aveiro, Portugal, [ricardo23carneiro@gmail.com](mailto:ricardo23carneiro@gmail.com)

one significant target segment for e-mail marketing campaigns, and their intense usage and familiarity with the technology make them an important segment to understand their behaviors towards e-mail marketing, especially in terms of the factors that make them open a promotional e-mail.

Arguably, e-mail marketing efficacy is primarily associated with opening and reading the e-mail messages, considering that e-mail marketing campaigns can have very diversified objectives (e.g., commercial, promotional offers, customer support). This article provides valuable insights for managers regarding factors that may help increase the effectiveness of mobile e-mail marketing campaigns targeted at millennial consumers.

### **Literature Review**

Millennial consumers are heavy smartphone users (We Are Social, 2022) and use them for a wide variety of activities, such as accessing e-mail. According to Moreno et al. (2017), millennials prefer brands that match their personality, lifestyle, social and community values, so they are characterized as a generation that quickly bonds with brands on their mobile devices. The literature suggests that millennials accept and consider mobile ads in their buying decisions more than the older generations (Ünal, Erciş, et al., 2011). E-mail marketing is considered as one of the best forms of online advertising, not only because of its ability to reach the companies' target market (Rosário, 2021) but also because of its low cost, fast implementation, and most importantly for its effectiveness (Bharta, 2020; Hartemo, 2021; Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021; Rosário, 2021), especially among millennial consumers.

#### *Permission-based e-mail*

The success of an e-mail marketing campaign depends upon the consent of its recipients to receive the commercial messages through e-mail. This condition is imposed by the GDPR but has also been considered the best e-mail marketing practice. Chaffey and Smith (2017) are among the authors who stressed that the essence of e-mail marketing is permission-based or opt-in e-mail. Hartemo (2016, 2021) emphasized that the receiver's consent to receive commercial e-mail messages is essential to ensure that the receiver will open the e-mail and avoid subscription churn. The author suggested that, besides permission-based e-mail marketing, seeking the active participation of the receivers and sending only the relevant messages are other prerequisites of successful e-mail marketing. Rosário (2021) also noted that complying with these rules is essential for e-mail marketing effectiveness and avoiding harming the brand image associated with spam mails. Therefore, Grubor et al. (2018) recommended that companies should continuously strive to seek permission from their customers and prospects before targeting them with e-mail marketing campaigns and additionally should provide valuable content in each e-mail.

#### *E-mail open behaviors*

Millennials like to engage digitally with brands; however, they tend to impatiently ignore advertising messages when interrupted (Tsang, Ho, & Liang, 2004). According to José-Cabezudo and Camarero-Izquierdo (2012), e-mail messages are often unopened due to receiving e-mails at an inappropriate time, lack of time, or irrelevance to the recipient.

Moreover, the consumer must acknowledge the relevance of the message in the subject line itself and the sender's credibility even before opening the e-mail (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021). Several authors emphasized the importance of the subject line to motivate the recipient to open the e-mail (e.g., Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021; Sahni, Wheeler & Chintagunta, 2018) and of its inherent value to the customers (Grubor et al., 2018), by offering them monetary incentives like discounts and vouchers (Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021). Relevance, personalization, brand equity, and established relationships with consumers also influence e-mail opening rate (Sahni, Wheeler & Chintagunta, 2018), with evidence that informative and entertaining content with a high level of privacy result in attracting more customers (Jamalzadeh, Behravan, & Masoudi, 2012).

It should be noted that companies frequently provide incentives to make consumers subscribe to newsletters (Bhatia, 2020). Such incentives help companies to keep customers interested in their e-mails (Bhatia, 2020; Chaffey & Smith, 2017; Grubor et al., 2018).

The discussion above has identified some factors influencing the e-mail open rate, and it is assumed that the same factors are also responsible for the e-mail open rate on smartphones. It is also assumed that mobile devices pose challenges to e-mail marketing, considering the small screen compared to other

devices like personal computers, time constraints and context of smartphone usage. Considering the lack of literature on users' behavior towards e-mail marketing on smartphones, the present study was conducted to fill the gap and the findings are presented in the next sections.

### Method

The present study is exploratory in nature. The primary data for the study is collected with the help of semi-structured interviews of smartphone users with relevant experience in receiving newsletters and other e-mail marketing messages. The interview is considered a fundamental data collection technique in social sciences as it enables to obtain detailed information about individuals' perspectives, experiences, and behaviors regarding the phenomenon under study (Bryman, 2021). Furthermore, as the study aims to unravel the behavior of millennial consumers associated with mobile e-mail marketing and considering the scarcity of literature on this topic, the exploratory technique is considered relevant for this study.

The questions for the semi-structured interview were organized into three parts. The first part addressed a few questions regarding participants' experiences with e-mail marketing (e.g., How often do you receive newsletters and e-mails from brands on your smartphone?). The second part comprised of questions about their smartphone usage (e.g., what type of online activities do you perform on your smartphone?). The final part of the interview explored the motivations, perceptions, and overall experiences of using smartphones to open promotional e-mails.

The ethical procedures recommended for research in social sciences (Bryman, 2021) were followed in the study. In particular, participation in the study was voluntary, confidential, and anonymous. Participants were provided with complete information about the study (e.g., its objectives, expected duration, and ethical procedure), and informed consent was taken beforehand. They were told that there was no right or wrong answer to any of the questions posed during the interview, and that they could refuse to respond or cancel their participation at any time (i.e., during or after data collection). All identifications were removed from the transcripts, and the audios were only made available to the researchers and were destroyed after the transcript was ready.

### Sample

The study population comprised Portuguese Millennial who owned a smartphone and had experience receiving newsletters and other e-mail marketing campaigns from companies and brands in various sectors. Purposive sampling (Bryman, 2021) was adopted, as participants were recruited from researchers' social networks. Besides inviting individuals relevant to the study, and to ensure diversity of profiles, the sample comprised of diversified participants in terms of gender, age, and occupation (Table 1).

Participants	Gender	Age	Occupation	Interview Duration
A	Female	30	Employed	45 min.
B	Female	30	Employed	35 min.
C	Male	31	Employed	40 min.
D	Male	28	Employed	35 min.
E	Male	24	Student	25 min.
F	Male	28	Student	50 min.
G	Female	24	Student	40 min.
H	Female	23	Student	40 min.
I	Male	28	Unemployed	35 min.
J	Male	28	Unemployed	25 min.
K	Female	23	Unemployed	35 min.
L	Female	24	Unemployed	40 min.

Source: The Authors

All participants in the study are regular smartphone users, frequently checking e-mail on their smartphones and had subscribed to newsletters or given permission to be contacted by brands through e-mail. Therefore, the number of participants (n = 12) was considered adequate considering data saturation criteria (Bryman, 2021), which was achieved at the ninth interview.

### *Data analysis procedures*

Content analysis was performed following the recommendations of Bardin (2016), who argues that this procedure should be organized in three subsequent stages:

- (i) Pre-analysis when data is read and organised.
- (ii) Exploration, the longest stage when codification and classification is undertaken, and
- (iii) Inference and interpretation, leading to reliable and valuable findings.

### **Results and Discussion**

All participants in this study had some experience receiving e-mail marketing campaigns from brands and companies they permitted for this type of contact. The main reason for opening e-mail marketing campaigns on their smartphones was the value offer described in the subject line. The participants in the study stated that smartphones are their preferred media to receive e-mail marketing campaigns, the reasons for this are discussed in the following section.

#### *Preference for opening e-mail marketing messages on smartphones*

Participants prefer smartphones to access their personal e-mail accounts. They stressed that the use of laptops and computer is mostly related to their professional lives, academic matters or job search. Moreover, they confirmed checking e-mail marketing messages in their free time. For instance, Participant A identified some moments that are more conducive to opening these brand communications:

“(…) maybe I'm more predisposed to check brands' e-mails in those moments when I have nothing to do. At those times I am more likely to open my e-mail on my cell phone.”  
(Participant A)

One participant stressed that permission-based e-mails that are checked on the smartphone are often associated with interest and enthusiasm, especially regarding limited-time offers:

“(…) I think that the communication made by companies through e-mail is always exciting. There is always news, campaigns, promotions… And it has an impact on me in particular, since I usually receive e-mails from companies I have given permission to contact me, so I tend to be interested in receiving this type of information.” (Participant C)

The findings suggest that the increasing adoption rate of smartphones is associated with participants' preference for using these devices for checking their e-mails and the convenience it offers. It will be explored further in the coming section, this preference is justified by the convenience offered by smartphones.

#### *Convenience provided by smartphones to access e-mail marketing messages*

Overall, the participants in this study identified several reasons for their preference for mobile phones for accessing e-mail marketing campaigns. In the interviews, they stressed that smartphones make newsletters and other e-mails from brands more “accessible”, it is more “practical”, “easy”, and “fast to use”, and it allows “instant communication”, thanks to the portability and mobility of the device. One of the participants summarized how these characteristics facilitate the frequent opening of e-mails from brands on her smartphone:

“(…) the factor of being more practical and the communication being immediate. Also, because I have notifications turned on for when I receive an e-mail and I inevitably end up picking up my cell phone. It's always faster and more convenient than opening a laptop to check e-mail.” (Participant H)

Several participants mentioned that some e-mail marketing campaigns include time-limited offers, and through their cell phones they can access it more quickly and instantly, taking advantage of promotions or digital vouchers from some companies. One participant narrated a situation that occurred a few days before the interview took place:

“(…) Ryanair was promoting trips to Europe at €9.99 for a limited time and I received an e-mail with this campaign. (…) This is one of the great advantages that I see in checking my e-mail on my cell phone, not only because of the opportunities that arise but also because of the speed.” (Participant B)

Participant E reported a situation that happened on a Cyber Monday:

“(…) I remember that last year I had been looking at computer component products. Interestingly, on Cyber Monday I received some e-mails promoting products that I normally put on wish lists at very competitive prices, but with limited time. Of course, I enjoyed it! (…)”

Thus, it appears that the respondents frequently use their mobile devices, and that these are essential part in their daily lives (We Are Social, 2022). Interestingly, participants considered smartphones' features particularly convenient for accessing their e-mail (often constantly checked) and felt a preferable channel to interact with brands, including receiving and opening their newsletters, promotions, and other e-mail marketing campaigns.

#### *The importance of subject lines for e-mail opening on smartphones*

As the participants recognized that they frequently use their smartphones to check their e-mail, for professional reasons, they end up opening newsletters and e-mail marketing messages if the subject line indicates the message provides value to them. Millennials participating in this study stressed that they enjoy receiving simple and objective e-mails from brands with appealing subject lines. In some cases, the subject line leads them to open even unrequested e-mails from unknown companies, as noted by Participant C.

“(…) what drives me to open an e-mail is the subject line. Regardless of the sender, if the subject line is appealing, I end up opening it. You never know what might be in the body of the e-mail. (…)” (Participant C)

Some participants stressed that economic offers presented in the subject line were particularly appealing to them, in Participant J's case.

“(…) what drives me to open an e-mail from a company are promotions. But it is through the matter that I make my decision. That's when I realize whether or not e-mail is going to matter to me. (…)” (Participant J)

The findings of the study are in line with the literature on e-mail marketing, emphasizing the importance of the subject line to improve e-mail open rates ( Grubor et al., 2018; Lorente-Páramo et al., 2021; Sahni et al., 2018), which were described as particularly relevant in the case of checking e-mails on smartphones. The participants stressed that smartphones are particularly convenient for interacting with e-mail marketing, as demonstrated in the next section.

## **Conclusion**

The findings from the study support the main contributions of the literature on e-mail marketing applicable in the case of campaigns received by millennials through their smartphones. Additionally, it discusses the reasons for the relevance of mobile e-mail marketing strategies to the millennial consumers. First, mobile phones are the preferred media to read e-mails from brands, especially related to their personal lives. Second, smartphones are used intensively, e-mails are checked very frequently on smartphones, during break times, which make the recipients more willing to pay attention to this type of campaigns. Third, it is convenient, easy, quick to open e-mails on smartphones as per the participants of the study, indicating a greater propensity to open these brand messages when the subject line is relevant and includes limited time offers.

The study has some valuable implications for the researchers. It suggests e-mail marketing campaigns should have responsive design to perfectly fit the mobile devices since it is the preferred channel for the recipients. The participants prefer receiving simple and straightforward messages on their smartphones, which needs more attention from the practitioners. Furthermore, the subject lines seem critical to encourage millennials to open an e-mail. The economic benefits and limited-time offers are particularly effective, and all promotional e-mails should offer relevant value to the recipients to avoid getting ignored. Despite the interesting findings, this study is not without limitations. The small number of participants in this study and the fact that they were all from the same country led us to suggest that other studies should be conducted in different parts of the globe. E-marketing on smartphones is subject to the different types of challenges (Rosário, 2021), therefore the topic needs special attention from researchers. Future research should use quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore in detail the effect of consumer profiles on their behaviors towards mobile e-mail marketing, other types of interactions with e-mail marketing campaigns besides e-mail open rate (clicking-through or purchase),

and experimental designs with different kinds of subject lines. The relevance of the topic for managers and the scarcity of current research suggests that the number of studies should grow in the coming years.

### Acknowledgements

This work was financially supported by the research unit on Governance, Competitiveness and Public Policy (UIDB/04058/2020) + (UIDP/04058/2020), funded by national funds through FCT - Fundação para a Ciência e a Tecnologia.

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