

The Psychology of the Announcement

A report for
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Chapter 1: Birth Announcements

Over the decades the means by which people have announced major life events has not only said a lot about them as individuals, it has also revealed a great deal about contemporary society. What we “announce” and how we announce it has a rich social history, reflecting anything from attitudes to social norms and social status to how new technologies are being embraced and by whom. Announcements also have a rich social psychology, revealing what people wish to say about themselves through both the method and content of announcements. There is also the perspective of the recipient to consider, how, and what, we are told of the big life events of those around us reveals a great deal about our relationships and the way those people feel about us.

This paper is the first in a series of three chapters that will form the “The Psychology of the Announcement” report. This first chapter focuses on birth announcements, the second will look at wedding announcements and the third will explore the future of announcements (both what we will announce and how we will announce it in future). The report is based on several strands of research including historical literature reviews and interviews with a range of experts (including academic sociologists, psychologists, social historians and cultural commentators). The centrepiece of the research is a new survey of attitudes and behaviour in relation to announcements conducted in the UK, France and Germany. The surveys were conducted among nationally representative samples and included over 4,000 people in total. The research was compiled by consumer behaviourists Trajectory Partnership on behalf of PaperShaker.

A brief history of birth announcements and their social significance

The rituals around birth announcements and how they have changed over the decades reveal a great deal about some of the fundamental aspects of societies at the time, such as the state of gender relations, family relations, social status, education standards, healthcare standards, people's attitudes to new technologies and tastes. How we announce a birth not only says a great deal about us, it says a great deal about the times that we live in.

Pre-20th Century birth announcements

In a long sweep of history, we can see the transition from paternally-focussed to maternally-focussed announcement rituals. For many decades – right up to the 1960s – most of the rituals around birth announcements were paternally-focussed, be that new fathers handing out cigars to friends or buying rounds of drinks to “wet the baby's head”. These male focussed rituals were, in part, a reflection contemporary gender relations and social roles of men and women that were less equal than today. But they were also a reflection of the practicalities of childbirth and the state of postnatal medical practice at the time. Until relatively recently,

new mothers would spend long periods in “confinement” after a birth. Traditionally a period of confinement would last 30 days, but the period gradually reduced over time. So, inevitably, if women were confined to hospital for up to 30 days, a great deal of the “announcing” of a baby's arrival into the world would be done by men. This is especially true in the era before postal services were developed and when low levels of literacy meant that newspaper announcements were only for social elites.

‘Long before social media, humans have wanted to share what they're doing and what they're up to’

DAVID ELLIS, PSYCHOLOGIST

Pre-World War II birth announcements

The gradual improvement in education standards, and especially literacy, in the first half of the 20th Century was key to transforming birth announcements. As more people were able read, so newspaper announcements became more accessible to the masses. However, social status still retained a role with higher social classes making announcements in national newspapers or the socially appropriate society papers. The announcements of lower social classes would usually be restricted to local newspapers. With increased literacy also came

the ability to write letters and cards to announce births. This was important as, ever since the industrial revolution, extended families had been increasingly geographically dispersed. Cards and letters became a key method for informing socially and geographically more distant friends and relatives of a new birth. Again, these announcements served a socially significant role with the receipt of a card or letter being seen as the cue that it was now 'appropriate' to pay a visit to the new parents.

Post-War birth announcements

In the post-war era technology began to play a greater role in transforming the method and nature of birth announcements. There were two key developments, the more widespread availability of telephones and the more widespread use of photography. Telephones (not only in the home and at work, but also widespread availability of telephone boxes/ kiosks) made it possible for birth announcements to be made more immediately after the birth. Telephone announcements were usually only to close relatives and friends, but they would, in turn, spread the news to wider networks of family and friends.

In this way the advent of the telephone might have usurped the role of written announcements completely, had it not been for the simultaneous development

and widespread availability of photography. Of course photography had developed during the late 19th century, but easy to use "instamatic" and Polaroid cameras only became available in the 1960s. Prior to this a great deal of photography had required a professional photographer. So, from the 1960s on, it became more and more possible for people to send "snaps" of the new born to friends and relatives.

These technological developments allowed for more immediate and, in the case of photography, more intimate or personal announcements of births, tailored to fit the particular relationship of the parents with the recipient of the announcement. This allowed birth announcements to keep pace with more general social trends from the 1960s onwards of loosening social norms and greater individual freedom of expression.

1990s: Birth Announcements in the Digital age

Birth announcements were further revolutionised in the 1990s by the arrival of the internet, email and digital photography. This added further impetus to the trend towards more immediate and increasingly personalised birth announcements. It also saw the growth of new types of birth announcements. In particular, possibly the biggest social change in the period from the

People do value a physical card as it shows people have tried harder. Email is the process of selling you something. A physical card shows you've tried'

PETER YORK, SOCIAL COMMENTATOR

1970s to the 1990s, was the massive growth in women's participation in the paid work force. By the turn of the millennium the vast majority of women were in paid work and made up virtually half of the overall workforce. As a result, one of the new forms of birth announcements was the email to colleagues with photo attachment.

2013: Birth announcements on the cusp of a New Digital Revolution?

As we write this report, we sit on the cusp of a new era in birth announcements. We are now well into the second, "mobile" internet revolution with mass ownership of Smartphones and significant ownership of tablet computers in developed economies. These are allowing for a further evolution in birth announcements, the implications of which we are only just beginning to contemplate. Whilst people debate the pros and cons of mobile video or MMS messages sent directly from the labour ward, other commentators are heralding a whole new "big data" ball game for birth announcements. This quote from Rick Smolan's influential book "The Human Face of Big Data" 2012 sets the scene nicely

"There is now this stream of data trailing behind all of us. If I wanted to learn about my grandfather's life, I'd have his school and military records and maybe a few of his financial transactions. Everything would fit into a small filing cabinet. Now, in the first day of a baby's life, the human race generates 70 times the information contained in the Library of Congress."

Further, internet security firm AVG have coined the term "Digital Birth" to describe the moment an online identity begins. The name grew out of a survey that determined at least a quarter of today's children have digital births before their physical births. This occurs when excited parents post news of their pregnancy on their preferred social networks. They follow up with ultrasound images, perhaps an announcement of the baby's sex and so on. They contemplate a world where a person's digital identity can be largely out of their hands, even before they are born.

The Psychology of Announcement Making

According to psychologist David Ellis, social media and new technology hasn't changed the fundamentals of announcement making: people are still driven to share what they're doing. What new technology can do, however, is obscure who our 'real' social networks are: 'social media isn't making our friendship networks any bigger, just making our acquaintance networks bigger'. But the shift to digital communications can also have a positive impact on our appreciation of personalised announcements 'people get dozens of emails a day, but if you get something through the post that's really unique - you are making a connection and you're more personally involved.'

'If you think someone has gone to the trouble to think about the message, the design and the occasion rather than sending you some bland, impersonal stuff then you might think better of them'

**PETER MARSH, PSYCHOLOGIST
AND CO-DIRECTOR, SOCIAL
ISSUES RESEARCH CENTRE**

This summer, eyes across the world will turn to the UK when Prince William and the Duchess of Cambridge have their first child. For social commentator Peter York, they are unlikely to embrace new methods of announcements, and stick with the traditional process: 'you used to give the information in a class correct way and you didn't over share – and this will be the template the Royal Couple will follow. This isn't Hollywood'. He also sees the benefits of sticking with the 'real' in the face of the rise of digital 'people value a physical card... email is the process of selling you something, so a physical card shows you've tried.'

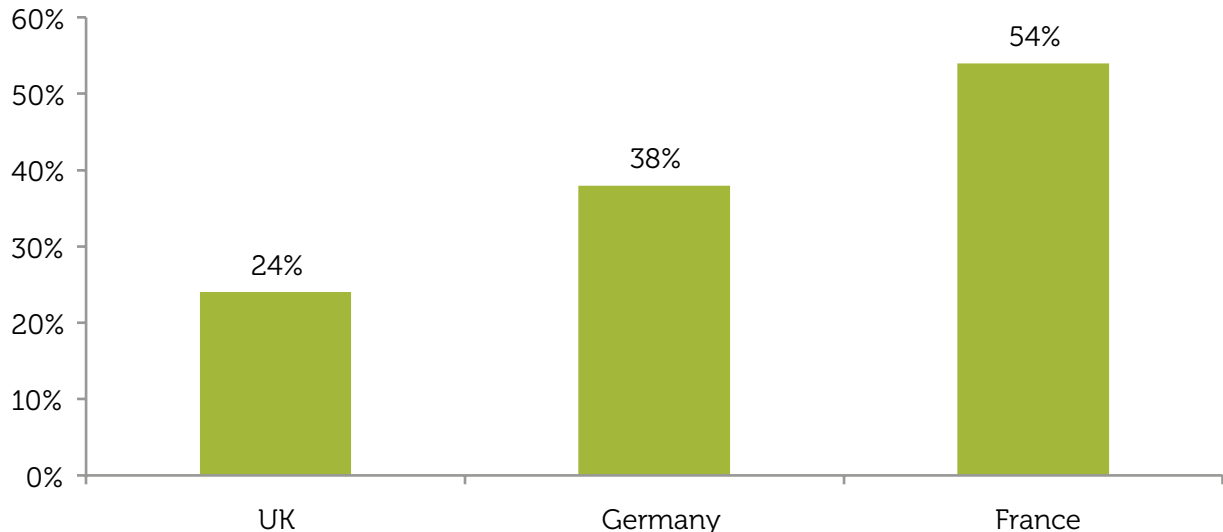
So for both psychologists and social commentators, traditional methods still represent one of the best ways to announce a birth. Fittingly, this seems like the perfect time to test the public mood on how they would like to both send and receive birth announcements. Are we willing to embrace the brave new world of the 'digital birth', do we hanker after a simpler time with more "real" rather than "virtual" announcements or is it some combination of the two? Our PaperShaker Psychology of Announcements Survey was designed to address precisely these questions.

Preferences for methods of birth announcement

Today there are a wide range of options for parents to announce births, from face to face or making a phone call to instant announcements to a wide range of people – such as social media or email. In our survey research, we asked people in the UK, France and Germany to rate their feelings towards different methods, assessing each for how each method would make them feel important, special, appreciated or warm.

Some methods were received particularly negatively – in all three countries, social media, text messaging and newspaper announcements were given the lowest scores, indicating a reluctance to embrace either the very new or the most formal or traditional methods. The announcement methods that scored the highest in all three markets were ones that allowed for personal contact. In Germany and the UK, people perceived face to face announcements to be the best, followed closely by personalised cards. In France, personalised cards were the most warmly valued of all methods, with face to face in second place.

Chart 1: Proportion of people who list 'personalised cards' as one of their top three methods for announcing a birth.



Source: Psychology of Announcements Survey 2013

A similar pattern emerged when we asked people to list their top three methods for announcing a birth. In the UK and Germany face to face is the most preferred option, with 86% and 90% respectively choosing it in their top three. In France, the most popular method of announcement was a phone call, followed by face to face. Consistent across all three countries was the relative popularity of sending personalised cards – which in both France and Germany were the third most popular method of announcing a birth (behind only face to face and phone call).

Associations with different methods of announcement

Different methods of making birth announcements are associated with different attributes – some are viewed overwhelmingly positively, and others are viewed more negatively. Among the negatively viewed methods are social media, which in the UK is viewed as impersonal (32% of people associate this word with the method) and gimmicky (21%); in Germany, sending an ordinary card is seen as old fashioned (25%) and boring (24%); in France, announcing a birth in a newspaper is seen as impersonal (31%) and naff (21%).

Table 1: most common adjectives associated with each method

	UK	Germany	France
Face to Face	Personal (54%) Thoughtful (30%)	Personal (50%) Proper (26%)	Personal (36%) Thoughtful (27%)
Phone	Personal (46%) Thoughtful (33%)	Personal (48%) Proper (29%)	Personal (36%) Efficient (31%)
Personalised Card	Personal (21%) Thoughtful (20%)	Stylish (23%) Personal (20%)	Thoughtful (29%) Tasteful (23%)

Source: Psychology of Announcements Survey 2013

Only three methods are generally associated with entirely positive attributes: face to face, phone and personalised card. In many cases, the attributes associated are very similar, implying that they are viewed positively for the same reason – all three of these methods are seen as personal and thoughtful, with survey respondents in the UK seeing personalised cards as traditional (19%) and respondents in Germany seeing them as stylish (23%).

'[On social networks] if people announce everything - including minor things - it can appear rather narcissistic'

DAVID ELLIS, PSYCHOLOGIST

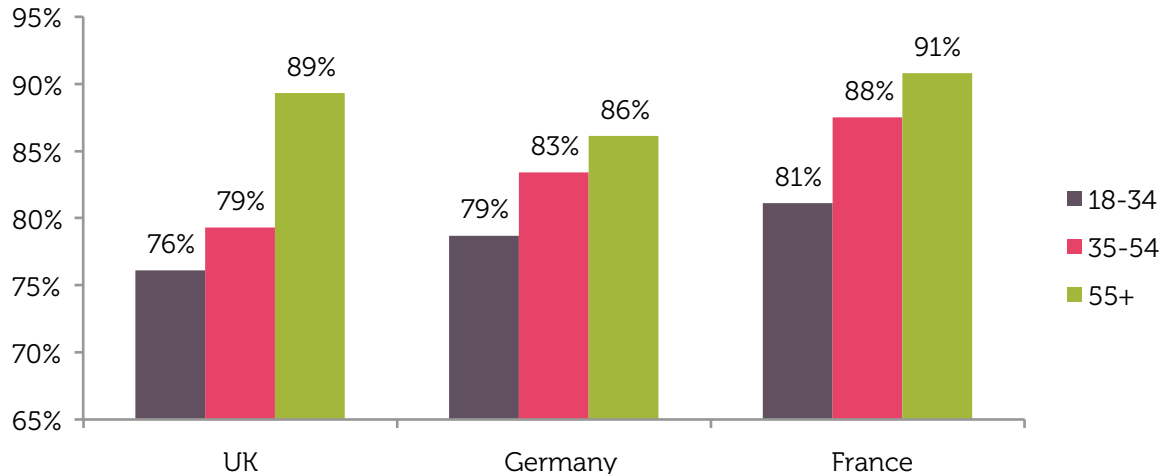
The 21st Century 'Babyquette' of birth announcement

'Etiquette is the kind of cement that keeps the social fabric from disintegrating - whether it's trivial communication or much deeper emotional states'

PETER MARSH, PSYCHOLOGIST
AND CO-DIRECTOR, SOCIAL
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With access to the internet and mobile phones now commonplace for new parents, there are methods of announcement – via text, email or social media – that were not available to older generations. With widespread use of social media and texts to stay in touch with friends, it might be a reasonable expectation that these channels would become popular methods of major life announcements, such as births. Overwhelmingly, however, announcements made online or by text are viewed negatively by all swathes of society – including younger people.

Chart 2: Percentage agreeing that 'making announcements on Facebook are too impersonal'



Source: Psychology of Announcements Survey 2013

We have already seen that face to face, phone calls and personalised cards are the most warmly viewed methods of making announcements, and that one of their key attributes is that they are 'personal' – with social media being viewed as 'impersonal' serves to underline its unpopularity as a method of announcement. Similarly negative views are apparent for other modern methods of birth announcement – around three quarters

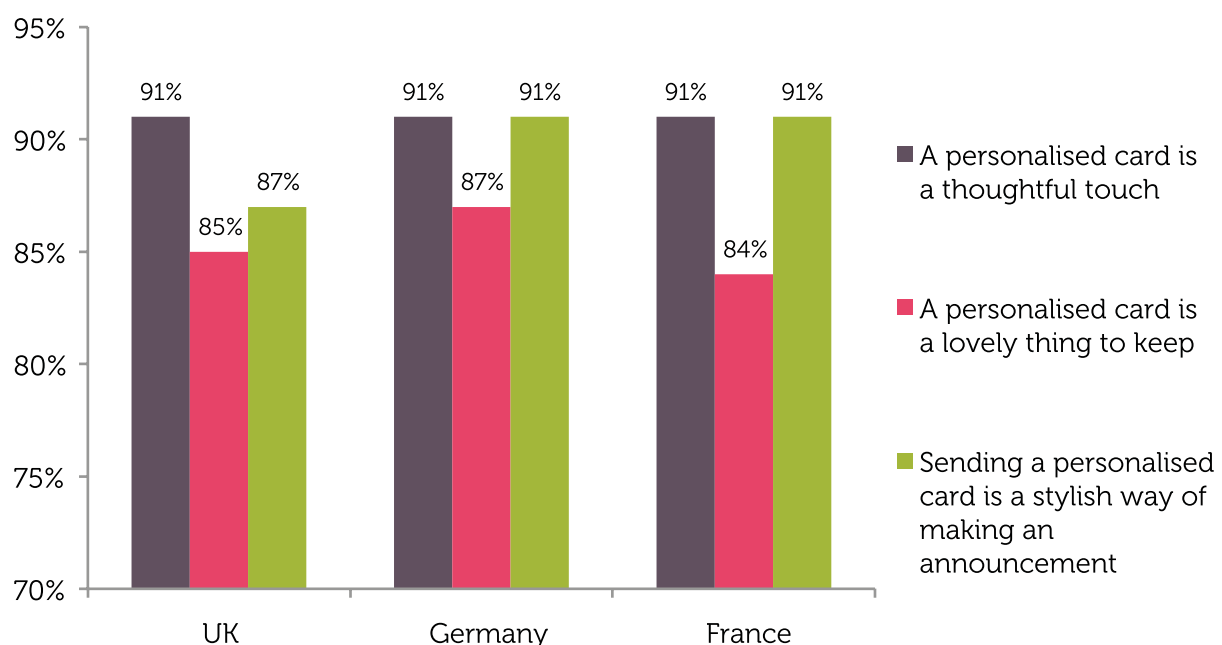
of people agree that it is bad manners to make an announcement by text (74% in the UK, 77% in Germany and 73% in France) and around two-thirds think email announcements suggest a lack of thought (71% in the UK, 63% in Germany and France). Despite their widespread use in other areas of life and social interaction, modern methods of communication are not considered appropriate for making announcements for big life events.

However, not all new methods are considered inappropriate for making announcements – across all three countries, personalised cards were praised for being thoughtful, stylish and worth keeping.

It seems clear that people still identify strongly with the benefits of traditional forms of announcement making, and highly value methods of announcement that facilitate personal and emotional connections with the recipient. Certainly, there is no desire to embrace digital announcements, which are seen as impersonal and lacking thought.

'You could design an announcement that would be kept and that becomes, in a sense a work of art, which is very different to an email. An email isn't something you keep.'
DAVID ELLIS, PSYCHOLOGIST

Chart 3: Percentage agreeing 'slightly' or 'strongly' with each of the following statements

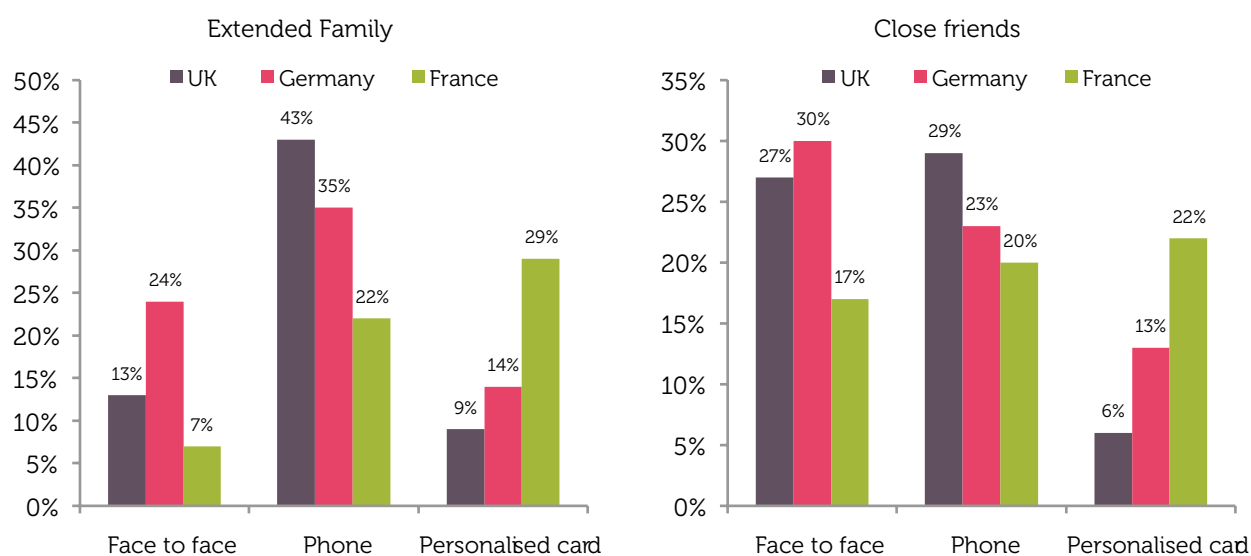


Source: Psychology of Announcements Survey 2013

Who gets what? (and how many)

Methods of announcement vary greatly depending on the recipient – the closer the connection, the more personal the announcement. For this reason, phone calls and face to face announcements are most common for immediate family in the UK, Germany and France, but after immediate family members, the methods diverge. In the UK, Phone calls are the most popular method for announcing births to close friends and extended family, with social media reserved for wider acquaintances. In Germany, phone calls and face to face announcements are popular for wider family and friends, but more than 1 in 10 would use a personalised card to announce a birth to either extended family, close friends or acquaintances. In France, extended family and close friends are most likely to hear about a birth through a personalised card – only 7% of people in France would announce a birth to their extended family face to face, compared to 24% of people in Germany and 13% in the UK.

Chart 4: Preferred method for announcing a birth, extended family and close friends



Source: Psychology of Announcements Survey 2013

The potential volume of personalised cards sent to announce a birth each year is subject to a wide range of factors, and varies widely across the three countries. Overall, people in the UK would send the lowest number of cards – 12.5 on average – to announce a birth, closely followed by people in Germany, who would send 16. Both nations trail far behind France, who would send 39.1 cards to announce a birth. Taking into account the number of births in each country per year, this equates to a large overall tally in each country. In the UK, this would total 9.6m personalised birth announcement cards sent each year; in Germany, 11.4m would be sent, and in France, 30.9m.