

Demographics, Psychographics and the Uses and Gratifications Theory, Understanding Text and Preferences

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ABSTRACT

The issues of how the media affect people and what people do with the media have presented perennial and perplexing questions for communication scholars. Some of the research results in these areas are more controversial than useful. Uses and gratification studies straddle the two domains of media effects and people's employment of the media. The field of gratification research holds great promise in the continual search for comprehensive knowledge on how and why we use the media. Drawing from a wide range of local and international literature, this paper presents a clear and concise review of the ontological, epistemological and axiological assumptions of the uses and gratifications theory.

KEYWORDS: *Demographics, Psychographic, Uses and Gratifications Theory*

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INTRODUCTION:

Uses and gratifications theory is an approach to understanding why and how people actively seek out specific media to satisfy mass communication. Diverging from other media effect theories that question "what does media do to people?".

In a related development, some mass communication scholars have contended that uses and gratifications is not a rigorous social science theory. In this work, I argue just the opposite, and any attempt to speculate on the future direction of mass communication theory must seriously include the uses and gratifications approach. Also, the emergence of computer-mediated communication has revived the significance of uses and gratifications. In fact, uses and gratifications theory have always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communication medium: newspaper, radio and television, and now the internet. Although scientists are likely to continue using traditional tools and typologies to answer questions about media use, we must also be prepared to expand our current theoretical models of uses and gratifications.

Contemporary and future modes must include concepts such as interactivity, demassification, and asynchronies. Researchers must also be willing to explore interpersonal and qualitative aspects of mediated communication in a more holistic methodology.

This communication theory is positivistic in its approach, based in the socio-psychological communication tradition, and focuses on communication at the mass media scale. The driving question of the uses and gratification theory is: "why do people use the mass media and what do they use them for?". Uses and gratifications theory discusses how users deliberately choose media that will satisfy given needs and allow one to enhance knowledge, relaxation, social interaction/companionship, diversion, or escape.

Uses and gratifications theory arose originally in the 1940s and underwent a revival in the 1970s and 1980s. the approach springs from a functionalist paradigm in the social sciences. It presents the use of

media in terms of the gratification of social or psychological needs of the individual (Blumer & Katz, 1974). The mass media compete with other sources of gratifications that can be obtained from a medium's content (e.g. watching a specific programme), from familiarity with a genre within the medium (e.g. watching a soap opera), from general exposure to the medium (e.g. watching TV), and from the social context in which it is used (e.g. watching TV with the family). U & G theorist argue that people's needs influence how they use and respond to a medium. Zillman (cited in McQuail, 1987:236) has shown the influence of mood on media choice: boredom encourages the choice of excitement content and stress encourages choice of relaxing content. The same television programme may gratify different needs for different individuals. Different needs are associated with individual personalities, stages of maturation, backgrounds and social roles. A development factor seems to be related to some motives for purposeful viewing: e.g. Judith Van Evra argues that young children may particularly like to watch television in search of information and hence more susceptible to influence (Evra, 1990:177, 179).

Mass media provide some of the most captivating information and entertainment sources. Use and gratifications, also known as usage and gratifications or needs and gratifications, is not a single approach but a body of approaches to media analysis that developed out of many varied empirical studies, beginning in the mid-20th century.

The basic theme of uses and gratifications is the idea that people use the media to get specific gratifications. The basic tenet of uses and gratifications is that people are not helpless victims of the all-powerful media, but use the media to fulfil their various needs. These needs serve as motivations (gratifications sought) for using the media. Gratifications obtained should correspond with gratifications sought for the media to be able to meet the needs of the users. Underlying this perspective is the notion that people are motivated by a desire to fulfil certain needs. So rather than asking how media use influences users' media choices, it is important to note that the media choices that people make are motivated by the desire to satisfy a wide variety of functions: entertainment, diversion, social connection, personal identity, information and the like (Cho et al, 2003).

Jay G. Blumner and Elihu Katz devised their uses and gratifications model to highlight four areas of gratification in media texts for audiences. These include: personal identity – for example, characters in soap operas experiencing something the audience

once did. The personal identity need explains how being a subject of the media allows us to reaffirm the identity and positioning of ourselves within society. This can most be seen in soaps, which try to act as a microcosm of society as a whole. The characters in soaps are usually designed to have wildly different characteristics, so that everyone can find someone to represent themselves, someone to aspire to, and someone to despise.

Personal relationships – a media text provides information for “water – cooler talk” at work with colleagues, what is happening in the latest reality television show? Many people use the television as a form of companionship. The television is often quite an intimate experience, and by watching the same people on a regular basis we can often feel very close to them, as if we even know them. We also talk to the television a lot. Not many football fans can sit through a televised match without shouting at the players or the referee, and many people tell characters what to (or not to do) next.

Another aspect to the personal relationships model is how we can sometimes use the media as a springboard to form and build relationship with real people. Having a favourite television programme in common can often be the start of a conversation, and can even make talking to strangers that much easier. There are also some studies that suggest that some families use sitting around watching television as a stimulus for conversation, talking to each other about the programme or related anecdotes while it is on.

Surveillance – The surveillance need is based around the idea that people feel better having the feeling that they know what is going on in the world around them. One of the genres this is often applied to is news. By watching or reading about the news, we learn about what is happening in the world, and as the news is usually bad news, this knowledge leaves us feeling more secure about the safety of our own lives. This idea might seem a bit strange, that the more we know about tragedies the safer we feel, but sociologists argue that ignorance is seen as a source of danger, and so the more knowledge we have the safer we feel. When looking at the news, it is easy to spot news items that give us this reaction. For example, if it wasn't for watching the news, we might be unknowingly become vulnerable to the latest computer virus or end up in hospital with an awful track record.

Diversion – a media text which provides escapism for the audience, for example, a holiday programme. The diversion need describes what is commonly termed escapism – watching the television so we can forget about our own lives and problems for a while and

think about something else. This can work with positive programmes, such as holiday shows or the constant happy endings in the Mexican soap operas, Zee World, Nollywood, which help to cheer us up and make us forget our own problems.

Demographic/Psychographic Factors and Patterns of Programme Choice

The investigation of patterns of programme choice by viewers based on certain factors constitutes another area of profound research interest in the entire uses and gratifications studies. The mediating factors include demographic and psychographic variables, availability of viewer for programmes they prefer, the viewer's environment and the scheduling patterns of television stations.

Of all these, there have emerged two dominant perspectives on programme choice. The one is premised on the uses and gratifications approach – the assumption that “Programme choice is a rational action motivated by expectancy of gratification” (Ogunmodede, 1988). In other words, programme selection would be influenced by programme contents which best satisfy specific needs. The other dwells on models of choice in which individual choice is influenced by available programme content.

Following loud protests over the lack of an empirically established link between programme preference and choice, Webster and Wakshlagh (1982) diverted their own attention to the province of factors intervening between individual preference and the final choice (in the context of viewing programmes). The two researchers analysed the influence of group viewing on programme choice by identifying and isolating both solitary and group viewing and by examining the effect of each pattern on programme type loyalty. (Programme type loyalty entails a tendency for viewers to either seek out or avoid programmes). They found that group viewing alone did not abate programme type loyalty. However, when heads of households viewed programmes with a group whose composition varied, programme type loyalty decreased. In a related study, Tereza Domzal and Jerome Kerman (1983) sought to determine the impact of television audience segmentation according to need gratification instead of demographics on programme choice. The assumption here was that programme choice was contingent on information about what needs television fulfilled and what satisfaction it brought. They re-established the existence of three (3) classes of viewers already predicted by Glick and Levy (1962). These classes are those who accommodate it.

Each of these classes selected programmes differently though the entire sample embodying all these three (3) classes was homogeneous.

Contributing to the body of findings in the area, McDonald (1986) hypothesized that other household members would influence the individual's choice of television programmes watched by an individual. In the study, viewing patterns as well as factors predicting television viewing were examined. Also examined were factors such as extent of peer co-viewing and viewing-inertia. The analysis showed that viewing was more likely done with people similar to one e.g. mates or peers. The conclusion, therefore, was that co-viewing may be a salient factor in viewing pattern or programme selection.

Still on the psychographic perspective, some researchers have devoted efforts to the investigation of the influence of the lifestyle on viewing patterns. Studies such as those done by Eastman (1979 and 1986) analysed how the psychographic variable of light/heavy viewing affected what is viewed or is affected by already set patterns of viewing.

Factors Affecting Individual Media Use or Content Selection

Research endeavours in this direction were inspired by earlier studies, especially in the 1930s, which found non-use of media among people of lower socio-economic status (Gallup, 1930; Nafzinger, 1930). This situation was explained to have arisen from the lack of resources and cognitive skills due to low education and the lack of social contacts and leisure time on the part of the low socio-economic people. Schramm and White (1949) confirmed the above result. In their analysis of factors influencing newspaper readership, they reported that, general readership had a positive association with education, age, and economic status. Other studies by Katz et al (1974), Okpata (1980) and Burgoon (1980), all generated similar findings. But Chaffee and Choe (1981) disagreed with the foregoing results. They contended that the traditional structural factors have become inadequate explanations of newspaper readership, was declining simultaneously with a remarkable rise in levels of education and economic prosperity. Based on their analysis, they suggested three “dynamic” factors which either individually or co-jointly determined media use and non-use. These were:

- A. Traditional structural factors – those which arose from the individual's location within the social structure and which were generally beyond his control, for example, income, age, and education.

- B. Transitional factors – those which arose from the individual's life cycle changes such as marital status, parental status, residence, etc. Those whose pattern of media use were not influenced by structural changes (a) above might be affected by transitional variables.
- C. Self-imposed factors – these were residing in the individual's personality, relating in particular to his interest or apathy in the services offered by the mass media.

The environmental factor as a determinant of media use was introduced by Cobb (1986). She reported that environmental factors were the most influential in newspaper usage among young persons. For adolescents, the following predictors of newspaper readership were listed:

- Perception of time to read the newspaper
- Availability of newspaper in the home
- Usage of other media
- Perception of time spent by parents in newspaper reading
- Newspaper-related attitudes
- Demographics (race, sex and grades)

Contrary to popular findings in this area of functions of media behaviour, Jeffers (1975) found among other things that education, age, sex and marital status did not appear to be valid indicators of individual media consumption patterns in several media. This "iconoclastic" finding conflicted directly with results of Lyness (1952) and Schramm and White (1949). The former reported that attention given to the mass media increased with age and that boys and girls showed a marked preference for different subject matters across different media while the latter showed that age strongly determined preference for different media contents.

Ontological, epistemological and Axiological Assumptions of the uses and Gratifications Theory

The ontological assumptions of the uses and gratifications theory suggests that individual media users have the freewill to choose the media and its contents that best satisfies his needs or where such individual receives gratifications for using such media.

Mass media users have the motivating capacity to make decisions on media content arising from the availability of divergent channels which is made possible by digital satellite television which enables the media user to make choices based on the media users' demographic and psychographic variables.

According to the theory, media consumers have freewill to decide how they will use the media and how it will affect them. This theory takes out the

possibility that the media can have an unconscious influence over our lives and how we view the world.

This suggests that the audience is conceived as active. The idea focuses around the assumption that the viewers are goal – oriented and attempt to achieve their goals through the media source. This directly reflects and responds to the needs of the audience members in obtaining the media source.

More so, the mass communication process allows for much initiative in linking need gratification and media choice which lies with the audience member. This is encompassing the idea that people use the media to their advantage more often than the media use them.

The epistemological assumptions consider changes in the trends of media use and gratifications derived from such trends of media use and gratifications derived from such trends. The changes in the medium reflect the society's way of communicating. The media competes with other sources of need satisfaction. This focuses on the fact that the individual has several needs and that many of the goals of media use are derived or supplied by the individual audience members themselves.

However, the various changes in medium of communication reflects the use by the individual audience members. The changes in medium also manifests in programme content which naturally reflects audience members choice e.g. analogue, digital and now social media (Twitter, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram etc.).

Also, the axiological assumption suggests that everyone will act and feel the same way bearing in mind the fact that they use the same medium. The theorists believe that the audience can only determine the value of the media content. It is the individual audience members who make the decision to view the media, therefore they place the value by their individual decision to view it.

These assumptions provide a framework for understanding the exact conditions between the media and the viewers.

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