

Uses and Gratifications in Digital Media Communication:

Revitalizing a Flawed Theory

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Abstract

This paper explores the communication theory of “uses and gratifications”, and presents an analysis of recent communication research that shows room for growth and improvement in four main areas of this theory in order for it remain relevant and applicable in a society of digital mass communication. In order to thoroughly examine the four main flaws found in the original uses and gratifications research, this paper reviews recent research reviving the theory of uses and gratifications, as well as several media-effects studies and research on selective exposure. This paper assesses the partially antiquated theory of uses and gratifications through a modern lens in order to point out the inconsistencies in the original research due to an historical gap, and suggests a more balanced view of the theory of uses and gratifications in the age of digital media communication.

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Uses and gratifications theory of communication revolves around the central idea that audiences select what communication media they will consume based upon their preferences, as well as what is useful and gratifying to their own goals and interests, hence the name “uses and gratifications” (Katz, 1973). The original research, published by Elihu Katz, Jay G. Blumler and Michael Gurevitch in the 1970s, but begun years earlier, was quite revolutionary for the time. Katz et al emphasized the concept of a “strong audience” (Griffin, 2012), able to choose what media to consume, as well as when and how they consume it, which was fairly divergent from the previous mainstream opinion that audiences were simply unwilling sponges, with no say in the fact that they soaked up whatever the media threw at them. One author likens this contrast to a child being force-fed by a parent, versus an adult strolling through a cafeteria deciding what to eat based upon their particular desires or cravings at a particular time (Griffin, 2012). Katz et al believed that to study media effects accurately, it was crucial to understand the needs an individual was seeking to satisfy by consuming that particular bit of media.

Theory Analysis and Discrepancies

Katz et al’s research presents a list of uses and gratifications, heavily based on the self-reports of the individuals who participated in studies and surveys. The eight (8) reasons Katz et al cited that the average individual consumes media are: passing time, companionship, escape, enjoyment, social interaction, relaxation, information, and excitement. In effect, Katz et al’s study of communication was based almost completely on the psychology of the consumer, and the psychology principle of selective exposure.

The crux of uses and gratifications theory of communication is that people are active participants, able to choose what media to consume based upon what will satisfy their particular desires, and that those same people can choose how the media they consume affects them.

Several problems arise when analyzing the original uses and gratifications research in light of new digital media as well as subsequent studies. This analysis seeks to outline and address each problem, determine if this theory can be applied to the current and future generations of media consumers, or if it is null because of outdated concepts, ideas and information, and present a plan for furthering effective research and the transformation of uses and gratifications theory.

Reliance on Self-Reporting

The first discrepancy in uses and gratifications theory is the research's heavy reliance on self-reporting. This is a challenge for the majority of research that utilizes the extremely common telephone interview or online or paper survey methods of polling study participants. The fact that people do not always provide accurate or honest information about themselves or their habits has been the focus of multiple studies in the fields of psychology and sociology. One study, the findings of which could readily be applied to many cases of less than accurate self-reporting, explores why people dramatically over-report news exposure. Reasons cited for this include a lack of effort in fully understanding the questions asked, recalling their own experience, and answering the question completely accurately, as well as the idea of social desirability, or the individual's desire to portray him or herself to a researcher and to themselves as what they perceive to be socially desirable (Prior, 2009). A major shortcoming of uses and

gratifications theory is that Katz et al's list of uses and gratifications is gleaned solely from individuals reporting these as their reasons for media usage, rather than from more objective, third-party, observatory research. The consequence of this is a potentially limited scope of the reasons people choose to use media, and perhaps an overly positive representation of reasons for media consumption.

Lack of Media Study

The second weakness of uses and gratifications theory lies in its focuses only on the psychological factors of media consumption, rather than spreading attention equally to the study of the media itself. This issue can be attributed almost completely to the time in which the original research was conducted; an era in which media channels were limited to a handful of mass communication outlets – television, radio, film, newspapers. Therefore, this weakness is less a fatal flaw and more an opportunity for innovation and adaptability of the tenets of the theory to current digital media. This issue is explored in more recent research that seeks to fully develop uses and gratifications for a new generation of consumers. One study presents four new categories of uses and gratifications because as stated, “it is problematic to conceptualize convergent media like the Internet as a single monolithic source. Instead, it is more useful to disaggregate such media in their constituent affordances (e.g., interactivity) and study the uses and gratifications obtained from each of those affordances” (Sundar, 2013). In essence, the Internet has transformed almost every element of mass communication, but most notably, how people consume media, and the reasons why people consume that media. These reasons absolutely extend beyond Katz et al's eight cited categories. For example, many people utilize the Internet because they profit financially from e-commerce. By focusing

only on social or psychological aspects of media choices, this theory limits itself in the current age of digital media by assuming the position that the actual neutral medium through which mass communication is transmitted has no effect on the consumer's choice, and this is simply no longer the case.

Individual's Power to Determine Media Intake

A third area that must be addressed is Katz et al's central idea that the individual can determine how media affects them. This needs to be considered in light of the current climate of concern about negative media effects on individuals and society as a whole. Government and non-governmental agencies, medical groups, and scholarly organizations alike have conducted research, released studies, promoted campaigns, and hosted summits raising concerns on the perceived negative impact of the media. Ranging from alarm over depicted violence, pornography, drug and alcohol abuse, to distaste for poor celebrity role models and the fashion industry's negative impact on body image in adolescents, the concerns over the effects of the media on the individual do not reconcile with Katz et al's concept of people as active participants in complete control of media choice and outcomes. Numerous studies have been conducted that point to direct impacts of harmful media consumption on individual development, relationships, social interaction, and psychological wellbeing, especially in younger individuals at crucial stages of growth and development (Strasburger, 2012). There is a disparity caused by the idea that the consumption of this media is always a choice, and not sometimes a passive, osmosis-like effect that occurs without the consumer realizing it (Hastall, 2013). This is especially true of infants and young children, the newest generation of which is exposed to all types of media communication without their permission or any real awareness or

participating in the decision-making process. Additionally, passive intake of stimuli is still consumption of media even by adults, and the impact of these stimuli on the brain must be considered in the study of media intake, and just how much control individuals have over that intake. As with the second weakness of the uses and gratifications theory, this third problem can be traced back to the date and origins of the original research, and the fact that the volume of mass communication media was miniscule in the nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies compared to the open informational floodgates of the current digital age.

Individual's Power to Determine Media Effects

The fourth and final flaw in the uses and gratifications theory is somewhat tied to the previous issue of negative media impacts on the individual. The last concern to be addressed tackles Katz et al's very central idea that individuals can determine what effects the media they consume has on them. Uses and gratifications theory is humanistic in that its very axis is the individual person, their desires, yearnings, powers, and weaknesses. While some studies and research choose to focus on the actual channels of communication, uses and gratifications is based upon the idea that media effect is actually determined by the personal desires of the individual choosing that media. Again, because of the historical gap, it is necessary for this theory to not only be updated, but to face the possibility of a very structural change. Numerous studies show that it is simply not possible for an individual to control the exact ways media, especially new digital media, affect the brain, as well as health, habits, opinions, memories, and ideas (Wang, 2012). While absolute control, autonomy and respect should be given to each individual consumer of media, it is nearly impossible to argue that every consumer can control the

exact outcome of each interaction with a piece of information disseminated through mass media communication.

Conclusions and Future Study

While this paper has presented an argument against several of the key components of the communication theory of uses and gratifications, it is possible that this theory can be adapted to explain, explore, and predict the behavior and impact of a new generation of consumers in a new digital age. While an individual may not be able to fully control or decide all of the media they consume, or all of the effects of that media, the current age of the Internet and accessibility in many ways empowers the individual consumer to have more control over what media they consume. For a future expansion of uses and gratifications theory, there is benefit in taking the more balanced view that while individuals can and should attentively work to monitor and control their response to their own media consumption, the effects of modern media consumption are not always known and cannot always be controlled, and thus they should develop an even higher awareness of the first half of Katz et al's theory, e.g., their own choice and selection in their exposure to media communications. It is necessary to conduct a study combining uses and gratifications research with media-effects studies and selective exposure research to gain a well-rounded understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the modern consumer of media communication in the digital age, and the applicability of the theory of uses and gratifications in a modern society.

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