

# Uses and Gratification Perspectives in New Media Environment

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masscomhod@uoc.ac.in  
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## Muhammadali Nellyullathil

Dean, Journalism & Mass Communication, University of Calicut, Kerala, India

### Abstract

With the advent of digital technology and its consequent impact on information and communication, media consumption is fast changing in its various aspects like audience formation, media-audience interaction and use patterns. (Kaplan and Haenle in (2010). Similarly, media production, distribution and ownership also undergo tremendous changes in the networked online environment. Newer and newer professional techniques are practiced, new devices are introduced and unending debates over ethical considerations are going on. Issues and challenges experienced never before are arising out innovations come by almost every day. On the other hand, people, who were formerly known as audience, shedding off their aura of media consumers, develop new-fangled affinity/indifference to media of various types, resulting in unpredicted, sometimes, contradictory impacts like closure of newspapers in the West and explosion of the Press in the East. Unexpected outcomes of the inventive steps and styles coming up on technological front often trigger cultural shocks to the traditional societies in the form of increased use of online pornography or e-commercial scams. The present article seeks to revisit the structural factors elaborated by the Weibull in analyzing Uses and Gratification of media consumers against the background of the present day new media trends.

### Keywords

uses and gratification, networked media, new media users

### Introduction

Digital media offers to users and content developers hitherto unattainable freedom and chances to unearth new facts and integrate wider audience, listen to more voices and present a variety of angles to the news stories in addition the facilities for storage and retrieval. At the same time technology offers stronger ways to

water the rules more closely through technology, ranging from streaming operation to real time broadcasting, capturing personal and intimate moments and spreading them instantly reaching on to millions across the globe in seconds.

The chances for getting news that too live and real time, from multiple channels /sources. Make people opt for networked digital tools rather than traditional media like cable television, print newspapers and public or private radio. Ubiquity of smart devices that too converging multiple media on a single platform round the clock with less or no payment, causes for total shift in the way traditional audiences are formed and integrated themselves with the mass media. Fragmented audience and narrowed social categories customize themselves with the new trends practices by new media using the unlimited option for diversification and innovation.

In his discourses on structural approach to audience formation McQuail elaborated that “the media use is largely shaped by certain relatively constant elements of social structure and media structure. Social structure refers to social facts such those of education, income, gender, place of residence, position in the life cycle and so on which have strong determining influence on general outlook and social behaviours. He continued as follows: “Media structure refers to the relatively constant array of channels, choices and content that is available in a given place and time (McQuail, 2006).

In this changing scenario, the present article looks into what happens to the audiences when they consume online digital media content or media itself. The framework of analysis in general is that of Uses and Gratification (U&G) perspectives and specifically that of the U&G bases schema developed by Weibull.

### **Revisiting U&G perspective**

Uses and Gratification is a psychological perspective that looks in to the way and motivations of the individual’s media use. Its framework is receiver-based and cantered on the receivers’ needs and wants as well as the nature of their satisfaction with the media experience. Demographic and psychographic variable of the users in addition to their personal choices of media are crucial components of the framework. The assumption is that based on the needs, motivations and the expectations clubbed with sociological and psychological structures as well as the past experiences the individuals use media and attain relative gratifications of varied forms. In U&G perspective, the audience is active and selective.

The foundation of Uses and Gratification approaches is the famous Lasswellian concept of communication (1948), which defines the functions of mass media as surveillance of environment, correlation of events and transmission of heritage. Wright (1960) added entertainment as an addition to this list. In 1940s scholars like Lazarsfeld (1940) and Herzog (1940, 1944) focused on the reasons for audiences use of various media and their content while in later ages, Blumer and McQuail (1969 ) and Blumer and Blumler and Katz (1974) unearthed the dynamics between expectations and gratifications in practical perspectives. In 1950s, the arrival of television triggered more studies on the motivations of the use of new medium.

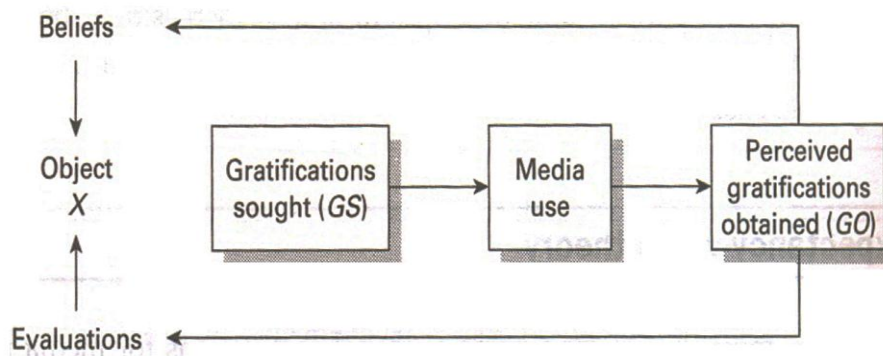
At the same time, the scholars (Blumler and McQuail, 1969) started to focus on the possible linkages among media use patterns, gratifications and the other

personal or social behaviours like politics. Rosengren (1974) studies stressed the significance of personal characteristics and traits of the user in his /her potential use of media. It is the team led by Palmgreen, Wenner and Rayburn (1980) introduced a refined foundation to the Uses and Gratification perspectives, which has been well discoursed in later research literature and prompted more studies.

The traditional media gratifications as listed by McQuail are as follows:

1. Information and education
2. Guidance and advice
3. Diversion and relaxation
4. Social contact
5. Value reinforcement
6. Cultural satisfaction
7. Emotional release
8. Identify formation and confirmation
9. Lifestyle expression
10. Security
11. Sexual arousal
12. Filling time

In 1965, Palmgreen and Rayburn put fort the well-known formula to measure gratification in relation to the user's expectancy and the real experiential outcome.



**Figure 1: Expectancy-value model of media gratifications sought and obtained (Palmgren and Rayburn, 1985)**

The formula is

$$GS_i = b_i e_i$$

Where

$GS_i$  = Gratification sought by the user from a particular medium

$b_i$  = Belief of the user that the media will have potential to provide a particular result.

$e_i$  = User's evaluation, essentially emotional, most often on the basis of the outcome experienced.

### Review of Weibull's structural factors

In a networked society, both the social and media structure are being reshaped reciprocally and independently depending on their characteristics. This fact is well detailed in the graphical representation of the phenomenon, presented by Weibull (Weibull, 1985).

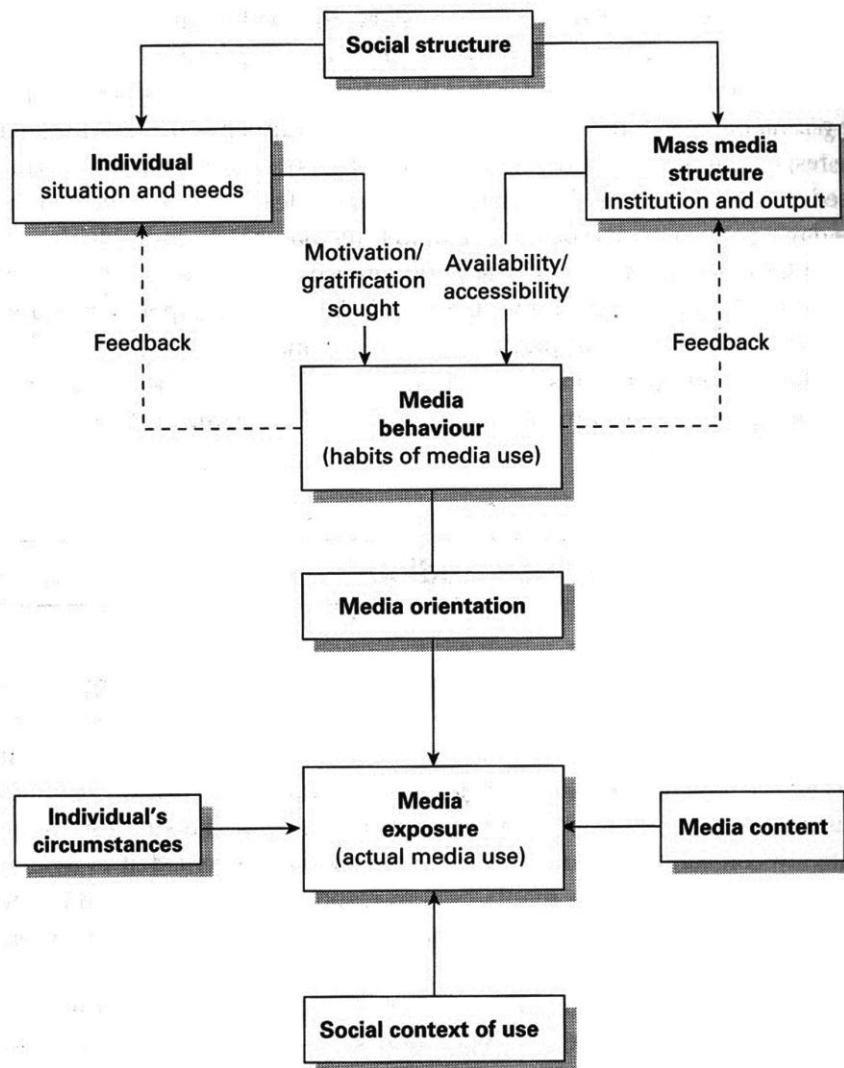


Figure 2: Structural model of media use (Weibull, 1985)

The model indicates the dynamics exist in individual situation and need and it refers to the mass media structure, both as institution and output. They collectively contribute to media behaviour and consequently, in a wider perspective, to media orientation. Though this schema was set keeping the traditional models of communication and consumption in mind; it is well fit for digitized media scape also, especially when digital tools redefining the information seeking behaviour as well as the content consumption patterns in diversified individual circumstances. Weibull's conceptualization was based on the uses and gratification perspective, but when applied to the mediated digital context, it is doubtful whether other facets like social context of use are significant.

In his original work, Weibull tested this schema with traditional print media environment, specifically newspaper reading. While discussing the implication of structural changes and their inner dynamics, Weibull indicated the limitations of the changes take place.

In changing content, especially socio economic and technological scenarios, needs are created and get oriented by the personal choice and societal trends. It never happens in vacuum. As McQuail observed, many these appear to have a social or psychological origin. Typical of such needs are those for information, relation and relaxation, companionship and diversion or 'escape'.

The advanced archival systems available with digital media and absent with traditional media developed a mindset among information seekers that, information, irrespective of its type- peripheral/in-depth referential/primary, scholastic/superficial etc.- is always in the reach and no need to keep in brain since well-established and highly sophisticated retrieval mechanism is present a click away. This invalidates the traditional notion of information need as conceptualized in uses and gratification perspectives suggested by every scholar in the field.

The second concept is of relaxation. Traditional media was either informational or entertaining or both at a time, but social context limits or predicts the options to provide relaxation to human minds. In such contexts, media serve as better safety valves that offer relaxation just like any other cultural entity or product. In networked digital media sphere, the cultural dimension of media is being lessened by the overpowering nature of the networks which make the digital environment itself a culture. Similar is the case of companionship. The intensive and high end integration potential of digital networked media offer two types of companionship, rather than the one-dimensional nature of the traditional media. The first one is embedded in the media itself. For example social networking sites, which put forth a number of ways of connection and companionship while the other way of relationship is through audience's interaction and subsequent engagement in the production of media content. The latter assumes more significant when user generated content constitutes a lion share of the content available in digital media. More so, the practice blurs the lines between the user and the audience as well as sender and receiver providing chances for interchangeable use of the terms. In a

schema where user's content generation overpowers the traditional content development practice, media themselves come close to the audience and serve as an advisor in neighbourhood. In that sense, the nature of digital media, most often than not, goes beyond the conceptualization by Weibull in his discourses on uses and gratification schema.

Diversion /escape is a concept well attached to companionship in traditional media. Similar to what was detailed in the case of other typical 'needs' diversion is also offered by new media not as a auxiliary function, but as an escape by itself. Earlier in their studies of newer devices like electronic media (Perse, 1990) and telephone (Dimmick and Rothebuhler, 1984) put forward the notion of affinity, while discussing the uses and gratification aspect and McQuail has summarized the same as follows: "Relative affinity with different media is associated with differences of expectation and gratification sought" (McQuail, 1996).

Same way it's worth exploring what happens the rewards media offer to the audience when journalism goes online and being a networked practice. According expectancy-value theory, media use, especially its volume and nature, by the reward that use expect from media, that too on the basis of his/her past experiences with the media. This reward which is most often experience at psychological level is considered by media users with their subjective value. This essentially what is termed as gratification (Palmgrann and Rayburn, 1985).

## **Conclusion**

How far the formula works in the scenario of networked media? In conventional media as authors envisaged, the use is accounted for by a collection of attitudes towards the positive or negative outcomes by the medium and that a series of sub tasks involved in valuation of these outcomes by the user. This purely psychological process achieved after perception forming and the influence by the past experience. This is very natural in the case of traditional nonlinear medium like newspaper or radio where the user has a well-defined pre idea about the media and it is progressed in the true linearity in a phased manner. When it comes to networked online media, which is in fact not a single medium but a bunch of media clubbed together thanks to multi-mediality, unfold layers after layers arranged horizontally or vertically through non-linear, but hyperlinked content. In this environment, needs and expectations are not mainly developed on the basis of the users past experience and perception of the medium, but, on the basis of momentous stimuli since the non-linearity stir stimuli in unexpected ways. In other way, the interaction experience of choosing of the media as well as their content is crucial, unprompted action, mostly guided by hyperlinks.

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