



Beyond Audience Empowerment: Revisiting Uses and Gratifications Theory in Evolving Media Landscapes

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ABSTRACT

Uses and gratification theory is based on the concept of “gratifying the needs through the use of media”, and theory has an “audience-centric” approach. In 1969, Blumler and McQuail initiated the work of understanding the motivational factors behind watching political programs by people during the United Kingdom elections of 1964. Afterwards, the work was carried by Blumler along with his colleagues for future work on Uses and Gratifications theory. The study examines all the possible dimensions of U&G theory as well as the areas where it is applicable. For this purpose, different articles, research papers and books have been considered to provide precise, however healthy information on U&G theory, while concluding it on the future direction along with certain recommendations. Moreover, this study also discusses the application of U&G theory on various mediums including TV, radio, internet, social media, advertising, news, music, video games, e-consumer behavior and its validity in the 21st century.

Keywords: Uses and Gratification theory, active audience, needs and gratifications

INTRODUCTION

Uses and gratification theory aims to understand the use of media by people in their daily routine. It has provided various insights into how and why different mediums such as newspapers, radio, books, television and internet are adopted by masses. It has significance in the future research of mass communication and no

future research of mass communication is completed without considering the uses and gratification tradition (Ruggiero, 2000). At present, it is considered as a sub-tradition of media effect research by mass communication scholars (McQuail, 1994). Uses and Gratification theory (1974) follows the approach which is “audience-centered” rather than effect based and it deals with peoples’ motivation behind utilizing a certain medium for need gratification. According to this theory, the effects of media are limited on audience because it not passive or inactive audience who consume the content of media blindly and will get affected easily, instead the audience is active who is selective in the use of media content and has certain reasons behind using a particular media as well as the active audience critically analyses the content they consume.

Active Audience; the core of U&G Theory

The notion of active audience was re-evaluated by researchers in 1980s, where it was restated that although the outcomes of mass communication were explained by uses and effects phenomena; however, it is the audience activity that initiates it. The “active audience” concept is not absolute or static concept rather a variable one (Rubin, 1994). Few theorists stated that level of activeness of audience varies from person to person, from situation to situation and difference in time (Levy & Windahl, 1984). Dependency and Deprivation theorists supported the concept of audience activity and stated that audience activeness ranges from high to low depending upon the circumstances a person is facing. If an individual is stressed and emotionally disturbed, he/she is likely to spend more time using media and consequently his/her involvement goes from low to high. On the contrary, when a person is happy and wants to enjoy moments, he/she will use media less frequently, hence his/her involvement is relatively low. (Grant, Guthrie & Ball-Rokeach, 1991). According to Katz & Blumler (1974), the active audience is the one who utilize different mediums for satisfaction of their various needs that varies from psychological to emotional, social, information, diversion, and many other needs. It is the audience who is self-aware and has specific motivations for consumption of a certain type of medium for need fulfillment.

Needs and Gratifications

Uses and Gratification theory asserts that people use media in order to fulfill their diverse needs. Katz, Blumler & Guveritch (1974) have categorized the needs of people into four types; Diversion, personal relationships, personal identity and surveillance. Individuals utilize various mediums like TV, radio, internet etc. to divert themselves from routine lifestyle, to seek companionship in media or attempt to find the alternative of personal relationship, to reinforce personal values or personal identity sometimes, and for seeking political, social or entertainment related information. Other than this, McGuire (1974) also classified the needs into two basic types; cognitive needs associated with acquiring information and knowledge and affective needs related to the emotions and feelings of individuals. Furthermore, Katz, Gurevitch & Haas (1973) developed five groups of needs including cognitive needs related to understanding and knowledge, affective needs

including sentiments, personal integrative needs related to individual status, social integrative needs involving the connections with family, friends and acquaintances, and the tension release needs meant for finding escape from the daily routine.

Besides, McQuail in 1983 also formulated the classification of the common use of media and stated that people use media for four basic purposes i.e. information seeking, personal identity, social interaction and entertainment. Firstly, people utilize media for getting information about the recent events, happenings in their surroundings, for self-education, knowing the views and opinions of the scholars, writers and seeking guidance. Second is personal identity, which aims at strengthening personal values, identification of the models of behavior and for gaining insight. Thirdly, the social interaction and integration states that most of the people use media for interaction with friends and families for conversation, carrying out social roles and developing sense of belonging. The last classification for media use was entertainment. People use media for stress relief, enjoyment, passing time, sexual arousal etc. Additional dimension was presented by McQuail in 1994, he was of the view that personal social conditions and psychological temperament also affects the way people utilize and analyze various media content.

Basic assumptions of U&G Theory

In 1974, Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch put forward the basic assumptions of the theory based on the relation between audience and their selection of media for use. Firstly, audience is active rather than passive and use of media is based on certain goals but the goal or purpose to use media varies from person to person. Secondly, it is the individual who has authority and choice to decide which medium will gratify his/her need and the individual is exposed to only a limited content of media which is able to fulfill their needs. Thirdly, media has competitors, as being a part of society and different media organizations compete with one another with the motive to satisfy the needs of their target audience because if they will succeed in satisfying the needs of their potential audience, then they will be able to survive in the media competing environment. Additionally, media and individual, both are influenced by surroundings, therefore if the individual gratifies his/her need through other individuals, than they are less likely to turn to media. Fourth assumption affirms that audiences have enough self-awareness and they know why they are using certain media, what are their motives and interests, hence making it easy for researchers to collect data. Based on audiences' selection and consumption of particular media, they analyze the content of media, hence they influence media rather than media influence them. Finally, after consuming certain content of media, people make value judgment and provide appropriate feedback regarding media content. Judgments about media content can only be assessed by the audience if they are active enough to critically analyze whatever they watch or listen to.

Developments in Uses and Gratification Theory

In the late 1920s, US Motion Picture Research Council conducted The Payne Fund Studies in which Hebert Blumer, Philip Hauser & L.L.Thurstone examined that youth of America was affected as a result of watching movies (Lowery & DeFleur,

1983). This was criticized by Rosengren, Samaragdi & Sonesson (1994) who viewed the study as effect-oriented rather than individual use of media. Finally, uses and gratification tradition started to originate in 1940s where researchers were interested in knowing the audience involvement in selection and use of medium and researchers of that time become more interested in individuals' media use instead of effects study. (Wimmer & Dominick, 1994). Afterwards, many modifications were brought in the U&G tradition; however, the theory of Uses and Gratification was presented in 1974 by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch.

1950-1970 Research

During this period of 20 years, the researchers focused on the functional analysis introducing the functionalist paradigm in the social sciences, hence to view the dynamic role of audience in uses and gratification study rather than a passive role. 1950s study was much focused on the individual-media interaction by researchers of Uses and Gratification tradition and psychologists. It was till 1970, when researchers concentrated on the gratifications sought and did not focus on the outcomes and obtained gratification (Rayburn, 1996). Then the focus was narrow down to the motivation of audience (what motivates the audience to consume a certain medium) and how the media was used by audience for gratifying social and psychological needs. U&G tradition was criticized by Elliot, Swanson, Lometti, Reeves & Bybee for providing unclear conceptual framework, lacking major concepts, blurred practical explanation and inability to interpret the media content by the viewers (Ruggiero, 2000). Furthermore, the concepts of gratification sought and received were classified as different concepts that need to be examined in the future research conducted on U&G theory (Blumler, 1979). Moreover, the era between 1950s to 1970s was considered as a paradigm shift in the field of mass media, as the researchers were becoming more interested in how audience controls the media instead of media influencing the audience and they were more concerned about the dynamic and active audience rather than static and passive audience.

1980-1990 Research:

During the era between 1980 to 1990, the research was conducted in order to extend, refine, redefine, and analyze the outcomes on individual level as well as the media use to be incorporated and treated as social phenomena (Rubin, 1994). Further clarification was made by Windahl (1981), made a clear distinction between traditional media effect and U&G approach. He was of the view that researchers of traditional media effects are concerned with the media while U&G researchers are audience focused. The concept of active audience was re-evaluated, and audience activity was re-examined while linking it to uses and gratification theory (Levy & Windahl, 1984) and active audience was stated as a variable concept instead of absolute for the reason that person acts different under different type and amount of activity in different time frame (Rubin, 1994).

Furthermore, models examining the level of audience activity emerged which explained that person who is stressed, restricted to home and having low income has high activity level and is more likely to be exposed to television and other mediums.

Time is considered as an essential factor arguing that selection of medium by people is different at different times and depending on the expectation and exposure. Examining the college students, Lemish (1985) found that students watch their favorite soap by digging the time from their schedule and then discuss with one another after watching it. Motivation behind using a medium is affected by the reliance of audience on it and to what extent the need of audience is satisfied by that medium.

Besides, Palmgreen & Rayburn (1985) developed the expectancy model of gratification sought and gratification obtained (GS and GO). This model implies that media tends to offer satisfaction of those needs that are anticipated by the audience. There is a clear distinction between GS and GO. When GO (gratification obtained) is relatively higher than GS (gratification sought), this means that the audience is highly contented with the media content, consequently it results in high level of attention towards that media content, hence audience will appreciate that content (McQuail, 1983). Palmgreen et al (1980) carried out a study on news programs of Television with the purpose to explore the relationship of GS and GO. The researchers reported that the gratification people generally seek vary and is not necessarily the same, as the gratification they achieve or obtain from media.

Rationale of the study:

The principle of uses and gratification holds importance as it is audience centric with regard to the selection of medium for gratifying the needs. People use different mediums for satisfying their various needs; it is the people who have choice, authority and control over the selection and usage. Academics, researchers and theorists have studied it from various perspectives considering its importance in field of media and communication. The rationale of the study is to provide extensive literature explaining the importance of U&G theory in all perspectives and how this theory is applied to diverse mediums such as TV, radio internet, advertising and social media. Moreover, this study will also provide future recommendations by presenting the work that has been done in past.

Significance of the study

The need to satisfy oneself cannot be denied; a person needs to satisfy oneself at any cost. The satisfaction is attached to certain mediums, as people need content in a presentable form. Technology has further made it easier, as people can now get knowledge, entertainment and data 24/7 anywhere at any place, thus making it significant to understand. People utilize several mediums for the purpose of seeking gratification of their needs; therefore, it is important to study that how people use various media for satisfaction of their needs, what needs they satisfy from those particular mediums and to what extent they get affected by the content of various mediums being an active audience.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHODOLOGY

The current paper aims to review and analyze the existing literature on Uses and Gratification theory, which serves as the foundation for performing research on

U & G theory and its application on Television, radio, news, film, music, Internet, social media, advertising, e-consumer behavior, video games and voting behavior. On viewing different articles and work done by researchers, the methods used by researchers for analyzing the uses and gratification tradition included experimental or quasi-experimental approach and observational study. Besides, many researchers have conducted surveys in order to collect the data and have also conducted focus group discussions or have asked their target audience for essay writing on the reasons for consumption of media. In short, researchers have used a combination of both qualitative as well as quantitative methodologies for testing the applicability of U&G theory in diverse mediums along with the investigation of the notion of active audience.

U& G theory and TV:

Television, since its advent has grabbed a number of viewers toward itself, as 97% Americans claimed to have TV sets at their homes (Nielsen.com, 2011). Along with the advancement in technology, the television programs have become easily accessible online. The decision-making authority resides more with Internet users compared to conventional TV, as they have choice to select and watch show at anytime and anywhere as compared to conventional TV users who have to sit and wait for their favorite show. Internet TV viewers have more authority and freedom, hence McQuail stated it as “consulting in information traffic” (McQuail, 1992).

Conventional TV has accepted new trends of technologies and now it has transformed to colored, HD and 3D screens (Eastman & Ferguson, 2012). Moreover, it also has three types of delivery methods namely, broadcast, cable and satellite (Carroll, 2001). Additionally, some network companies also possess online official websites to grab more viewers for their shows (Ferguson, 2012). Some theorists view that conventional TV holds the motivation for viewers as compared to digital medium where viewers lack the feeling to being connected to TV, in that case they watch TV while doing other works along it and lack complete attention (Carroll, 2001). Conversely, gratification varies, as today in 21st century people are more likely to watch TV shows online compared to conventional TV where they have to sit and wait, whereas some viewers still find conventional TV more comfortable and gratifying for their needs.

U& G theory and Radio:

Radio is the most widespread medium particularly in developing areas where radio reaches to even the rural areas spreading news, information and music to people in their local languages (Myers, 2007). It is the cheapest medium to purchase for people who cannot afford other mediums at large-scale or on daily basis (UNFPA, 2002). In America, listening to radio is considered as leisure activity (Katz Media Group, as cited in Safi & Iqbal, 2015).

Emergence of FM Radio in Pakistan has brought changes in the social sector. Now, people are keenly interested in listening the programs, news, music and talks on FM Radio, as it is easily accessible, easy to carry and easy to understand especially for the people who have access to listen up in their languages. It gratifies the needs

of information and news for the older generation and youth is satisfied with the entertainment programs and music. PEMRA has granted a license to FM Radio for entertaining the listeners, as it has a quality to attract a number of listeners and people are comfortable in listening to radio no matter where ever they are and whatever they are doing (Naqvi & Baloch, 2011).

U& G theory and News:

News is available in all formats after the emergence of technology, print media has in-depth analysis in editorials and opinion format, television has prime-time talk shows while internet has all this available in one platform. News consumers' selection of news source is activated because of the availability of news all day and night in all formats. Internet news has become the main stream news medium because online news is accessible without any regard to time (Online Publishers Association, 2004; Oostendrop & Nimwegen, 1998). Therefore, making it easy for the viewers to remain updated about the latest happening beside newspapers which is circulated after 24 hours and television for which the physical presence is required. Surveillance is the most significant need of individuals and people fulfill their political, educational and other information needs from the news whether it is in the newspapers, on Televisions or available on the Internet.

U& G theory and advertising

It is more useful to understand what is done by people to advertisement rather than what advertisement do to people. Every advertisement has its own target and impact on the target population; consumers are attentive towards advertisements and give it a value it deserves. Advertisement is done for providing information about the product, warranty implied on product, additional value, involvement, experience and post-purchase guarantee.

Attitude of consumers towards advertisement of televisions is based on information, characterization, social learning and affirmation of contact (Alwitt & Prabhaker, 1992). Advertisements facilitate people by providing those alternatives as well as stimulating competition and then by disclosing those alternatives. People use advertisements for gratifying their various needs such as information, diversion and other needs depending on age, gender, likeness and financial status.

U& G theory and Film

Film audience was studied for the first time in 1983 by Bruce A. Austin who considered it an important factor for study because of the money that viewers spend for watching it. Dr. Brain R. Johnson psychologist by profession views films as being able to extract emotions of fear, anger, happiness and pain and has also used films as a therapeutic aid. After watching movies, people like to discuss it and share their views about the subject of the film, hence gratifying their emotional and psychological needs. Movies are found it helpful in releasing stress and lowering emotional burden as people sometimes find themselves emotionally attached to the characters (Platinga & Smith, 2002).

U& G theory and video games

First video game study in relation to uses and gratification was presented by

Selnow in 1984, who examined that video game was played by youngsters mostly because it provides human companion, people learn about other people, action and activity escapism and excitement is also involved. Similarly, people use video games, so that they can pass their time, avoid doing other stuff and can enjoy and cheer themselves (Phillips, Rolls, Rouse & Griffiths, 1995). The core gratification as a result of video game is labeled as competition (Vorderer, Hartmann & Klimmt, 2003).

U& G theory and voting behavior

Politics and media hold a significant relationship, as it is only through media that information and messages about the campaigns and candidates is easily disseminated and widely spread throughout the country. Technology is an active process through which the ideas, views and opinions of people are shaped and reshaped. There has been a shift in technology from wheel to printing press and ultimately the electronic version in the form of radio and television (McLuhan, 1962). Initially radio was used for political purposes, then television was used for spreading information in the form of news, talk shows, debates and live coverage of campaigns. People are dependent on media for gratification of their informative needs, they get the information about different political leaders, hence it affects their voting behavior (Gomery, 2008). Recently among the most important political news channels include CNN, BBC, Al-Jazeera and Russia, today for disclosing both sides of the picture.

U&G theory and Music

Music has a special quality beside other ways of communication, with the ability of transmitting verbal, non-verbal messages and expressing meanings. It has both verbal (lyrics) and non-verbal (sounds) elements that makes it multidimensional. It possesses the power to reshape socio-cultural behavior, as it has the ability to transmit ideas and emotions. Therefore, it is stated as a powerful form of communication (Lull, 1988).

Young people are considered to be more prone to media exposure as compared to the older generation. Youngsters are more likely to consume music for sub-culture creation and resisting the patterns of affiliation. The needs vary as some people listen to music for understanding the universe and its pattern such as sufism, some for getting entertained while others for pleasure (Chaffee et al., 1971).

U& G theory and Internet:

The advancement in Internet along with the greater level of interaction other than traditional form of media has led uses and gratification tradition to understand the motivational factor behind using internet (Ruggiero, 2000). In order to understand the psychological and behavioral aspect of using internet, researchers have applied U&G principle in using internet. The core factor behind using the internet is “interactivity” examined by the researchers (Kaye & Johnson, 2001).

On applying uses and gratification theory to the internet usage, researchers have found seven factors of motivation behind using internet including social escapism, business agreement security and privacy, information/data, control of interaction, socialization, privacy and economic motivation (Karagaonkar & Wolin,

1999). Along with these motivational factors, people also spend time on internet for entertainment and stress relief purpose.

U & G theory and social media

Social media is the form of digital media that is used to share information, news, data, text, audios, videos and pictures among people from all over the world (Douglas, as cited in Papoola, 2014). Social media technologies include Face book, Twitter, Skype, LinkedIn, YouTube, Flickr, Google+ and few more, which are cheap, accessible and diverse. Users of social media have different objectives; few use it for educational and informative purpose while others for interactive purpose (Lewis, 2009; Osatuyi, 2013; Whiting & Williams, 2013).

One of the key factors of using social media is “social interaction” i.e., people have a forum for discussion, sharing views and participation on different issues (Asemah, 2011). People use social media for gratifying their various needs, 88% have been found to use social media for interacting with their family members, spouse and friends while 64% have been using social media for listening jokes, playing games, scrolling down humorous jokes and comments and viewing crazy stuff for laughing and enjoying (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Entertainment is yet another factor, as people like to be entertained, hence majority of people use social media for satisfying their needs of leisure and amusement (Park et al., as cited in Gallion, 2010).

U& G theory and E-Consumer behavior

Internet besides being the medium of information, entertainment and education is also effective for businesses, hence satisfying the consumers and their buying behavior. Attitude of consumer towards web is the key indicator of effectiveness of web and belief of consumers on internet technology (Chen & Wells, 1999). People are attracted towards the advertisement, as it is most effective and has great outcomes. People are attracted towards the advertisement of the product, clothes and electronic stuff and it is likely to influence their buying behavior. Consumers who find it trustworthy and holds a positive view on the brand advertisements like to spend more time on surfing these pages and satisfying their needs of being informed about all the latest and branded products and stuff (Haley & Baldinger, 1991).

U & G theory in 21st century

It is early in the communication history that researchers studied about the social and psychological gratification of people in terms of media content (Cantril, 1942). Since U&G theory was initially criticized by various scholars and researchers for lacking any practical implication in the field of mass communication; however, this theory revived in the 21st century with the evolution of technology. Now, technology has dominated the world, this century has globalized the world and hence brought everyone close to one another, altering the world into a global village. The new media of 21st century is more interactive where the audience is the generator as well as the consumer of the content and hence boundaries between the audience and creator of the content are diminishing (Singer, 1998). Moreover, people are now active and utilize media specifically Internet for fulfillment of their

needs related to information, entertainment, diversion and social interaction.

Critique on Uses and Gratification Theory

Although Uses and Gratification theory holds dominance in the field of mass communication research which has a unique theoretical perspective. It basically emphasizes the concept of active and goal-oriented audience rather than a passive and inactive audience. However, different theorists have criticized uses and gratification theory as well as its methodology. Firstly, U&G approach lack explanation of choosing and using media casually because it is based on circumstances and timely motivations, nevertheless the approach is best in understanding the choice and use of media in the presence of motivation (McQuail, 1994). Another critique on U&G theory is that this tradition is too individual centered limiting the study to individualistic level and leaving behind the societal implication, it ignores the societal perspective and the influence of media content on society as a whole. Besides, more attention was paid to use of media while neglecting the content of media (Elliot, 1974). Additionally, the theory focused on why people use media how they influence the media, which was criticized by various mass communication researchers who were of the view that media has a certain influence on attitudes and behavior of people, yet people are not powerful enough to influence the media. In short, this theory underestimated the power of media and overestimated the power of audience (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Furthermore, the methodology of U&G theory was criticized by the researchers, as it heavily relies on self-reports in which individuals maintain a record of their exposure to media content and the motivation behind consuming that content. Researchers found it difficult for individuals to keep check and balance on exposure patterns through observations. (Katz, 1987).

Based on self-reports, few critiques argue that it relies on personal memory which is doubtful, due to the fact that people sometimes make wrong and inaccurate recall of how and why they utilized certain type of media, thus such problematic behavior can lead to creation of errors and distortion in the study (Nagel et al., 2004). Another criticism was made on U&G theory that it lacks the ability to measure the actual behavioral change of individual; rather it concentrates on the outcome of being active audience i.e. being able to interpret the content more appropriately (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Further, Stanford (1983) argues that uses and gratification approach begins with the end result which is unsupportive of theoretical underpinnings. Similarly, the authority and power given to people is criticized, as this approach gives them an absolute free hand in selection and interpretation (White, 1994).

CONCLUSION

Uses and gratification theory has a long history in the study of mass communication and is essential in the study for future directions. The theory revolves around an individual who has a right to choose any medium as per the conditions and demand and satisfy those needs through the use of medium. From

print to electronic and moving towards internet, users got multiple mediums that can be used for satisfying their needs. Instead of focusing on effects of media, it concentrated on needs of the audience rather it is the information, education, entertainment needs or narrowing down to interaction, companionship, enjoyment, filling time and engaging in some activity. People use variety of mediums for needs gratification; few users adopt newspapers, books and novels for satisfying their informative and intellectual needs while others prefer watching movies and dramas in their leisure times and hence competition between various mediums has also increased for need satisfaction of their audiences. Considering the current scenario, this theory is best applicable in the 21st century as audience of this century is active and intellectual enough to have certain reasons behind consumption of certain media content.

Recommendations and Future Research:

Keeping in view all of the above-mentioned critique, direction of future research gets clear. They are stated as

1. In future, researchers can use the tradition for moving ahead from individuals to society and understand it on broader level.
2. Secondly, the results which are self-based needs to be studied in some other aspect, as they create human error and the whole tradition cannot be based on it.
3. Future research can also include studying the tradition in developing and under developing countries. In Pakistani context, internet usage motivation for the users of internet can also be seen.

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