



## A Historical Overview of Uses and Gratifications Theory

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### Abstract

This paper is a part of the thesis: A Study on Chinese IPTV audience. In this study, on the basis of uses and gratifications theory, starting from IPTV audience demand, the author endeavors to explore how variables affect audience satisfaction and put forward feasible suggestions so as to improve IPTV audience satisfaction.

Some mass communications scholars have contended that the uses and gratifications are not a rigorous social science theory. In this article, 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. And, I assert that the emergence of computer-mediated communication has revived the significance of uses and gratifications.

Theoretically and practically, for U&G scholars, however, the basic questions remain the same. Why do people become involved in one particular type of mediated communication or another, and what gratifications do they receive from it? Although we are likely to continue using traditional tools and typologies to answer these questions, we must also be prepared to expand our current theoretical models of U&G to include concepts such as interactivity, demassification, hypertextuality, asynchronicity, and interpersonal aspects of mediated communication.

**Key words:** Uses and gratifications; Computer-mediated communication; Interpersonal

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### INTRODUCTION

The uses and gratifications (U&G) approach has a long standing history in communication research and mass communication. At the core of the theory is the aim to understand how, why, and with what purpose people use the media in their everyday lives. The theory has provided numerous insights into how television, the radio, and print resources (e.g., newspapers, magazines, and books) could be adopted by mass audiences. While some scholars have dismissed the value of the U&G approach, Ruggiero (2000, p.3) has argued that “any attempt to speculate on the future direction of mass communication theory must seriously include the U&G approach”.

### 1. EARLY RESEARCH

Mass communication scholars today generally recognize the “uses and gratifications” (U&G) approach as a sub-tradition of media effects research (McQuail, 1994). In the early stage of communications research, an approach was developed to study the gratifications that attract audiences to the kinds of media and content that satisfy their social and psychological needs. Much early effects research was done by way of experimental approach with the purpose of exploring general lessons about better communication or about the unintended consequences of messages. Other media effects research endeavored to discover motivation and selection patterns of audiences for the new mass media.

Some mass communication scholars quoted “moral panic” and the Payne Fund Studies at the origination of U&G theory. The Payne Fund Studies were conducted in the late 1920s undertaken by the U.S. Motion Picture Research Council. Leading sociologists and psychologists including Herbert Blumer, Philip Hauser, and L.L. Thurstone endeavored to have a better understanding of how movie viewing was affecting the youth of America

(Lowery & DeFleur, 1983). However, Rosengren, Johnsson-Smaragdi and Sonesson (1994) held the view that the Payne Fund Studies were mainly effects-oriented promotion studies, contrary to the U&G tradition, which focuses on research of individual use of the media. Cantril's study of Orson Welles's "War of the Words" radio broadcast was narrowly focused on sociological and psychological factors related to panic behavior rather than develop a theory about the effects of mass communication (Lowery & DeFleur, 1983).

Wimmer and Dominick (1994) argued that U&G originated from the 1940s when researchers became interested in why audiences involved in diverse forms of media behavior, such as listening to the radio or reading newspapers. However, others argued that the perspective of U&G came out of Schramm's immediate reward and delayed reward model of media gratifications. Most of the early U&G studies were descriptive, sticking to make a classification of the audience into several categories.

## 2. 1950S-1970S RESEARCH

Despite there is disagreement among communication scholars in terms of the precise origin of the approach, during the 1950s and 1960s, researchers still explored many social and psychological variables which were considered as the indication of different patterns of consumption of gratifications. Therefore, Schramm, Lyle, and Parker concluded that children's use of television was associated with individual mental ability and relationships with parents and peers. Klapper put stress on analyzing the consequences of using mass media instead of making description of the use as was done in the earlier research. Mendelsohn presented several general functions of radio listening: companionship, relaxing, changing mood, providing useful news and information, and increasing social interaction. Gerson introduced the variable of race and stressed that race played an important role in predicting adolescents' use of the media. Moreover, Greenberg and Dominick made a conclusion that race and social class indicated how the television was used as a way of learning by teenagers (Cited from Ruggiero, 2000, p.5).

The studies conducted during this period indicated that the focus of the research is changed from the traditional "media effects" to the functionalist paradigm of social science; and the research should be focused on the functional analysis of U&G studies which would help to make the audience play a more dynamic role in mass media than a passive role. Evidently, Geiger and Newhagen (1993) glorified Klapper as the usher of the "cognitive revolution" in the communication field. Since 1950s, there has been plentiful research on the ways that audience interacts with the media in terms of cross-disciplinary work between U&G researchers and psychologists.

Before the 1970s, U&G research focused on gratifications sought without outcomes or gratifications obtained (Rayburn, 1996). During the 1970s, U&G researchers paid full attention to audience motivations and how the audience made use of media to gratify social and psychological need. To some extent, this may be interpreted as a way of response to a strong tide of criticism from other mass communication scholars. Critics such as Elliott, Swanson, Lometti, Reeves, and Bybee emphasized that there existed four serious conceptual problems challenging U&G: First, a vague conceptual framework; second, a lack of precision in major concepts; third, a confused explanatory apparatus; and fourth, a failure to understand audiences' perceptions of media content (Cited from Ruggiero, 2000).

U&G researchers responded in the following ways. Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973) listed the social and psychological needs that satisfied by exposure to mass media. Rosengren (1974) suggested that the audience is using media for particular needs associated with personal characteristics and the social environment of the individual when they produce problems and solutions. Those problems and solutions resulted in different motives for gratification behavior which produced by using the media. In turn, the gratification (or nongratification), produced by using media or other behaviors, also has an influence on the individual or society, therefore starting the process again and again. Aimed at exploring the close relation between psychological motives and communication gratifications, Palmgreen and Rayburn studied the reason for audience's viewing television and concluded that the U&G approach served as another important factor, apart from media availability, work schedules, and social conditions. Palmgreen and Rayburn supported that the fundamental task in front of the researchers was to "intergrate the roles played by both gratifications and other factors into a general theory of media consumption" (Cited from Ruggiero, 2000).

Fundamentally, Palmgreen and Rayburn were in response to earlier researchers' call to investigate gratification sought and gratifications received. Blumber (1979) identified three main social origins of media gratifications: normative influences, social changes and audience's reaction to the social situation. Furthermore, in response to that, McLeod, Bybee, and Durall (1982) theoretically clarified audience gratification. In the meanwhile, they drew a conclusion that gratifications sought and gratifications received were two different concepts which should be researched respectively in any future U&G research.

Another related theoretical development was the recognition that various cognitive or affective statements promote the use of the media, as predicted by the U&G approach. Blumber (1979) put forward that cognitive motivation promoted information gain and that the diversion of motivation promoted the audience

perceptions of the entertainment programs in terms of the accuracy of social portrayals. In related research, Mcleod and Becker (1981) found that individuals who were given advanced notice that they would be tested to make greater use of public affairs magazines. Bryant and Zillmann (1984) discovered that stressful individuals preferred to watch more peaceful programs while bored individuals tended to watch more exciting ones.

### 3. 1980S-1990S RESEARCH

Rubin (1983) stated that gratifications researchers were beginning to actively in response to critics. He concluded that researchers were seeking to make a detailed analysis of modified repeated or extended studies, to refine the methodology, comparatively analyze the findings of separate investigations, and treat the use of mass media as an integrated communication and social phenomenon.

Likewise, Windahl (1981) also attempted to promote U&G theoretically. In his "Uses and Gratifications at the Crossroads", he supported that the primary difference between the traditional media effects approach and the U&G approach is that a media effects researcher usually studies mass communication from the perspective of the media, while the U&G researchers studies mass communication from the perspective of the audience. Windahl believed that it was more beneficial for researchers to stress the similarities than differences and he coined the term "consequences" and supported the combination of the two approaches. Therefore, he suggested, observations from media itself and the use of media would serve as a more useful perspective. Windahl's approach moved the earlier U&G approach to a more recent research.

#### 3.1 Active Audience

In the 1980s, researchers reevaluated the notion of active audience. During this period, some researchers repeated that although both uses and effects sought to explain the outcomes or consequences of mass communication, they did so by recognizing the audience initiative potential and active potential (Rubin, 1994). Levy and Windahl (1984) attempted to present a more theoretically complete notion of audience activity and to examine audience orientations. In doing so, they linked audience activity to U&G, and Rubin (1984) suggested that audience activity is not an absolute concept, but a variable one. Evidently, Windahl (1981) argued that "the notion of activeness leads a picture of the audience as selective, a tendency which invites criticism" (p.176). Instead, he argued audience activity covers a range of possible orientations during the communication process, a range that "varies across phases of the communication sequence" (Levy & Windahl, 1984, p.73). In brief, different individuals act different types and amounts of activity under different settings and at different times in the process.

In support of this, theoretical active audience models have increasingly emerged, ranging from high audience activity to low levels of involvement. For example, both dependency and deprivation theories suggest that the audience who are stressful, confined to home, with low income exposed more to media. The media include television and communication technologies such as remote control devices.

#### 3.2 Dependency Theory

Media dependency theory itself supposes that media influence is determined by the interrelations between the media, its audience, and society. Media messages are characterized by the cognitive, affective, or variable effects because of audience's desire for media information is variable. That is to say, media dependency is high when an audience's goal satisfaction relies on information from the media system. Rubin and Windahl (1986) enlarged the dependency model by including the gratifications sought by the audience, which is considered as an interactive component with media dependency. Rubin and Windahl argued that the combination of gratifications sought and dependency ultimately produced media effects. They stated that the audience depended on media or messages when they either search for information purposely or use specific communication media channels or messages. For example, McIlwraith (1998) found that "TV addicts" often make use of television to relax them and distract themselves from unpleasant thoughts and even to kill time. This link between dependency and functions of media illustrates the U&G theory is capable of inter relating the communication between person and media.

#### 3.3 Deprivation Theory

Deprivation theory has an even longer history in U&G research than dependency theory. Berelson studied the effects of the 1945 strike of eight major New York City daily newspapers on audience behavior. Since then, more studies on media strikes have emerged. Kimball studied Berelson's study during the 1958 New York City newspaper strike; de Bock studied the effects of newspaper and television strikes in the Netherlands in 1977; Cohen examined a general media strike; and Walker analyzed audience's reactions to 1987 National Football League players' strike (Cited from Ruggiero, 2000).

Besides, Windahl, Hojerback, and Hedinsson (1986) suggested that the consequences of a media strike for adolescents were linked to the following aspects, for one thing, the total degree of perceived deprivation of television, for another, the program content such as entertainment, information, and fiction. These deprivations are not only related to media variables like exposure, involvement, and motives, but also related to non-media variables such as social concept orientation and activities with friends and parents. Windahl found that individuals feel more deprived in socially oriented environments.

### 3.4 Theories of Low-Level and Variable Audience Activity

There exist other factors leading to a much less active audience than ever. These factors include different time relations (advance expectations, activity during the experience, and post exposure), variability of involvement, and ritualistic or habitual use. More specifically, time relations theory argues that audience selection is quiet different at different times: before, during and after exposure to media. For example, Lemish (1985) discovered that college students arrange their busy schedules to watch a specific soap opera, formed program-centered groups, paid attention to the program, and discussed the program content with others after watching it.

Variability of involvement explains that the motivation to use any mass medium is also affected by how much the audience relies on it, and how well it satisfies her or his need. Therefore, many U&G researchers have added the expectancy in their research and have established theories of expectancy to explain media consumption with the employment of Rayburn Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) expectancy theory.

Fishbein and Ajzen's model put forward three beliefs: first, descriptive beliefs result from direct observation of an object, second, informational beliefs are formed by accepting information from an outside source that relates certain objects, and third, inferential beliefs are about the characteristics of objects not yet directly observed or even not directly observable. Palmgreen and Rayburn (1982) developed an expectancy model of gratifications sought (GS) and gratifications obtained (GO).

For example, a study about talk radio by Armstrong and Rubin (1989) concluded that listeners who called in thought it was less rewarding and less mobile for face-to-face communication. They believed that talk radio was more important to them, and they listened for more hours a day than those listeners who did not call in. In other words, the listeners involved more in the talk radio activity were more relied on it.

In terms of ritualistic and habitual media use, audience activity involves the concept of utility and audience's reasons and motivations for communicating, but little intentionality or selectivity. Rubin (1984) differentiated two viewing pattern of the audience: ritualistic viewing and instrumental use. He proposed that ritualistic use of television was for recreation, relaxation or companionship and the audience was attracted by the medium itself; as for instrumental viewing, on the other hand, indicated a more goal oriented use of television content aimed to satisfy certain needs like seeking information. However, he stressed that ritualized and instrumental use of media is not clearly isolated but interrelated to each other. Just as audience activity is variable, audience uses media ritualistically or instrumentally depending on background, time, external environments and personal demands. Therefore, a multidimensional view of audience activity emerged, put forward by him. This view strengthens the importance of media use instead of media exposure. In addition, Rubin (1994a, p.103) argued that U&G research needed to "continue its progression from simple explanations of effects and typologies of media motivation for conceptual models that explain the complexity of media effects process".

**Table 1**  
**Key Theoretical and Conceptual Developments During 1980s in U&G Approach**

Expectancy Value	<p><b>Tenets:</b> Cost-benefit analysis drives rational behavior; use of media partly built on expectation for gratification; measuring discrepancy between gratification sought versus gratification obtained</p> <p><b>Responds to:</b> Psychological conceptualization of antecedents to use; formalization of role expectations in uses and gratifications</p> <p><b>Citations:</b> Fishbein &amp; Ajzen (1975); Palmgreen, Wenner &amp; Rayburn (1980); Galloway &amp; Meek (1981); Palmgreen &amp; Rayburn (1982, 1985)</p>
Transactional	<p><b>Tenets:</b> Linking if media use to media effect via additive natures of gratification sought and gratification obtained; organizes hierarchy of variables that influences evaluation of media exposure</p> <p><b>Responds to:</b> Need for complexity to understand media uses and how connects to media effects; recognition of transactions as nature of communication</p> <p><b>Citations:</b> Palmgreen et al. (1980); Wenner (1982,1985,1986)</p>
Activity Orientation	<p><b>Tenets:</b> Audience activity fluctuates between two types; goal oriented = instrumental, habitual = ritualized</p> <p><b>Responds to:</b> Clarification of active conceptualization and what accounts for when someone is active; linking activity orientation to specific gratification</p> <p><b>Citations:</b> Rubin (1984, 1993)</p>
Activity Dimensions	<p><b>Tenets:</b> Activity measured along two dimensions with intersections creating specific activity types; temporal: before, during, and after of media use; orientation: selectivity, involvement, and use</p> <p><b>Responds to:</b> Clarification of active conceptualization; how activity can fluctuate over the process of media engaging</p> <p><b>Citations:</b> Levy &amp; Windahl (1984, 1985)</p>
Uses and Dependency	<p><b>Tenets:</b> Reasons for use determined by interaction of personal, social, and media technology industry factors; confluence of factors results in dependency on media technology text</p> <p><b>Responds to:</b> Need for complexity to understand media uses and how connects to media effects; recognition of media industry role in shaping media use and effects</p> <p><b>Citations:</b> Rubin &amp; Windahl (1986); Taylor (1992)</p>

To be continued



Continued

Selective Exposure	<p><b>Tenets:</b> Intentionality of selection, attention, and orientation; maybe conscious or unconscious  <b>Responds to:</b> Tendency to view humans as rational decision-makers; ability of people to actively recall reasons for media use  <b>Citations:</b> Feshtinger (1957); Klappe r(1960); Zillmann &amp; Bryant (1985)</p>
Emotional Management	<p><b>Tenets:</b> Media use as means to adjust emotional states; minimize bad feelings, maximize good feelings; first use maybe accidental  <b>Responds to:</b> Tendency to view humans as rational decision-makers; allowing for accidental media use primarily with subsequent impact on expectations  <b>Citations:</b> Zillmann &amp; Bryant (1985); Zillmann (1988)</p>

#### 4. NEW MEDIA COMMUNICATION AND THE REVIVAL U&G

U&G approach was not so popular among mass media scholars for several decades, but with the rapid development of telecommunications technology, U&G may enjoy its revival. The deregulation of the communications industry and the convergence of mass media and digital technology have changed the consumption pattern of audience dramatically. With the advanced technologies presenting audience with more and more media choices, motivation and gratification become one of the most crucial factors of audience analysis.

Communication scholars become more interested in online audiences because of these newer media forms. Singer (1998) argued that interactive media obscure the boundary between the sender and receiver of mediated messages. Furthermore, new media like the Internet is in possession of at least three attributes of data not commonly associated with traditional media: interactivity, demassification and asynchronicity, which leave us more space to explore the new media behaviors further.

##### 4.1 Interactivity

Interactivity has been defined as “the degree to which participants in the communication process have control over, and can exchange roles in their mutual discourse” (Williams, Rice, & Rogers, 1988, p.10). In this sense, interactivity significantly strengthens core U&G concept of the active user. Communication literature reflects six user-oriented dimensions of interactivity: threats, benefits, sociability, isolation, involvement, and inconvenience. These should be useful for the U&G approach research (Cited from Ruggiero, 2000). In addition, Ha and James (1998) listed five dimensions of interactivity: playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection and reciprocal communication. Ha and James put forward that for “self-indulgers” and “Web surfers,” the playfulness and choice dimensions of interactivity is to satisfy the self-communication and entertainments needs. As for goal oriented users, the connectedness dimension is to satisfy information needs. As to expressive users, the information collection and reciprocal communication dimensions are convenient for them to communicate with others of the same online interests. Ha and James regarded information collection and reciprocal communication dimensions at higher levels of interactivity, however, such dimensions

as playfulness, choice, and connectedness were viewed as lower levels of interactivity.

Heeter (1989) also defined interactivity as a multidimensional concept. First of all, there is amount of choice provided to users; second, a user should make efforts to seek information. Third, how actively responsive the media are to users, and the potential to monitor system use. Fourth, the degree to which users can add information to the system that the common audience can access, and the degree to which a media system facilitates interpersonal communication among a small group of users.

Therefore, the real advantage to interactivity for individual users is not simply multimedia videos, online shopping, or obtaining information on demand. After all, interactivity is not just the ability to select merchandise from a large number of them on the Internet or seek more television channels. Technologists argued that human computer activities indicate the human beings’ interactive representation, and interactivity shows the degree to which the new communication systems are able to respond to user’s demands. Nevertheless, on the Internet with current technology, interactivity still causes some serious practical limitations for users.

##### 4.2 Demassification

The term “demassification” was defined as the control of the individual over the medium by Williams (1988). Demassification is the ability of the media user to select from a wide menu. Chamberlain (1994) held the view that with the advent of the new technologies, the media users are able to select the media that in them tastes from the large number of media. Unlike traditional mass media, new media like the Internet can allow users to choose messages to their needs. Kuehn (1994) took “The New York Times” as an example. As for readers of the paper version of “The New York Times”, they must pay for the whole paper, while if you prefer to the electronic version of “The New York Times”, you can select the articles or information you are interested in.

##### 4.3 Asynchronicity

The term “asynchronicity” refers to the concept messages may be received with time differences. Senders and receivers of electronic messages are able to read the messages depending on their own time. It also means users can send, receive, save or retrieve messages at their

own convenience. In terms of the television, asynchronicity meant how VCR users to record a program for later viewing. With e-mail and the Internet, the audience is able to store, copy or print graphics and text, or transfer them to an online Web page. Therefore, the digitalized messages allow users to control more than traditional means.

The U&G theory has been adopted and adapted over the years to study the use of various media ranging from the more conventional mass media to the new media and later to mobile technology (Stafford et al., 2004; Chigona et al., 2008; Roy, 2009; Shin, 2009; Liu et al., 2010). Although some scholars have questioned U&G’s utility in studying the digital media, Ruggiero (as cited in Quan-Haase, 2012) posits there is a need to “seriously include” the U&G approach in any attempt to speculate on the future direction of mass communication theory.

Besides, it is contended that whenever a new technology makes its way into the arena of mass communication, users’ underlying motivations and decisions to use the new communication tool could be explained by applying the U&G paradigm (Elliott & Rosenberg, as cited in Liu, Cheung & Lee, 2010).

However, in order to effectively study and gauge the new media by using the U&G scales intended for traditional media research, Lin (as cited in Shin, 2009) holds that a revision to the scales will be required. Consistent with Lin’s idea is to Angleman (as cited in Shin, 2009), who believes existing theories require amendments in order to fit new media studies. Application of the U&G theory in various new media studies has been reviewed and an overview of those studies with their respective motivations is presented in the following table.

**Table 2**  
**Overview of Prior Studies on New Media U&G**

Research area	Author(year)	Motivations identified
Electronic bulletin board	James, Wotring, & Forrest (1995)	Transmission of information and education, socializing, medium appeal, computer or other business, entertainment
Internet	Korgaonkar & Wolin (1999)	Social escapism, transaction, privacy, information, interaction, socialization, economic motivations
Personal home pages	Papacharissi (2002)	Passing time, entertainment, information, self-expression, professional advancement, communication with friends and family
Internet	Stafford et al. (2004)	Process: <i>Resources, search engines, searching, surfing, technology, web sites</i> Content: <i>Education, information, knowledge, learning, research</i> Social: <i>Chatting, friends, interactions, people</i>
Virtual community	Cheung & Lee (2009)	Purposive value, self discovery, entertainment value, social enhancement, maintaining interpersonal interconnectivity
YouTube	Haridakis & Hanson (2009)	Convenient entertainment, convenient information seeking, co-viewing, social interaction
User-generated content	Mendes Filho & Tan (2009)	Content: <i>Information consistency, source credibility, argument quality, information framing</i> Process: <i>Medium; entertainment</i> Social: <i>Recommendation consistency, recommendation rating</i>
Twitter	Liu, Cheung & Lee (2010)	Content: <i>Disconfirmation of self documentation, disconfirmation of information sharing</i> Process: <i>Disconfirmation of entertainment, disconfirmation of passing time, disconfirmation of self expression</i> Social: <i>Disconfirmation of social interaction</i> Technology: <i>Disconfirmation of medium appeal, disconfirmation of convenience</i>

Perhaps the most important of the latest developments in the uses and gratifications approach is the development and diffusion of newer media technologies, such as the internet, digital games, DVRs, and mobile devices, all of which have become the targets for U&G research. The steady growth of new media has also spurred more discussion on that fundamental philosophical aspect of the active audience. One cannot escape conceptualizing the use of these new media as anything but active consumption. With new technology, audiences now have become so active that the term audience almost doesn’t fit instead they are now referred to as “users” to better describe their ability to make decisions and create content. The term media itself has also morphed from previously only referring to a handful of tools like magazines or TV shows. It now has a whole new meaning relating to

devices, channels, and even venues. With these new forms of media, users do not simply consume them, they help create them, and they interact with them.

## CONCLUSION

Uses and gratifications theory (U&G) was brought into the public’s view in the 1940s, and became popular in late 1950s and early 1960s when the advent of television provided individuals more choices in media consumption (Blumler, 1979). Researchers began to show interest in audiences’ engagement with various types of media, such as newspaper reading, radio listening, television viewing (Wimmer & Dominick, 1994). Thereafter U&G has been gradually developed as one of the most influential audience theories.

Rather than concentrating on effects of media on audiences, U&G is an audience centered theory focusing on

(a) the social and psychological origins of (b) needs, which generates (c) expectations of (d) the mass media or other sources, which lead to (e) different patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (f) need gratifications and (g) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones. (Blumberg & Katz, 1974, p.20)

The core assumption of U&G is that audience members are active, and their selection and use of media is purposive, goal directed and motivated to satisfy their social and psychological needs or desires. In fact, U&G assumptions may be best applicable to the internet and other interactive media like IPTV due to requirement of active levels need for users.

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