



Identifying Motivations for the Use of Commercial Web Sites

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The uses and gratifications theoretical framework has continued to prove useful in the study of new and emerging media. In previous research on television as a medium, motivations for media use have been grouped into either process gratifications (motivations associated with using the medium, like channel surfing) or content gratifications (motivations related to information or entertainment delivered by the medium, like watching the evening news for information). This study applies the uses and gratifications perspective to better understand the factors motivating commercial Web site use, and identifies a new media use gratification unique to the Internet: socialization (using the medium to communicate with people). Through the cooperation of two major on-line companies, this research reports the results of a two-part study that begins with the identification of 179 motivations for Web use and subsequently reduces those to five primary underlying factors. These factors are discussed and related to three key indicators: frequency of Web use, frequency of computer use, and affinity with the computer. Implications for new social gratifications for Internet use are discussed, and directions for future research are proposed.

INTRODUCTION

Information forms the underpinnings of modern society (Ball-Rokeach & Reardon, 1988; Rogers, 1986), and since media are required for the transmission of information at any level other than the interpersonal, the new medium represented by the World Wide Web might be considered the vanguard of the information society (Stafford & Stafford, 1998). The marketing strategies of industry are evolving into a mediated process that will support the commercial viability of "segments of one" in the form of direct-to-consumer commerce over computer networks (Rogers, 1986; Sheth, 1992). As this evolution takes place, the marketing communication flows that support commercial activity are reversing from marketer-consumer to consumer-marketer (Sheth, 1992); consumers are beginning to seek out the companies and products that interest them rather than relying on traditional mass marketing activities to inform and persuade them about opportunities.

As this idea of the segment of one develops in practice, it seems clear that the World Wide Web will present potent capabilities for reaching and commercially serving consumers (Drèze & Zufryden, 1997). However, throughout this evolutionary process, it also seems clear that marketers must begin asking questions about the unique characteristics of this new commercial medium; one critical question will concern the nature of motivations, which bring consumers to utilize

this new medium for commercial purposes (Stafford & Stafford, 1998). This consideration implies not only a need to understand what might motivate consumers to attend to marketing efforts on the Web, but also what might motivate them to use commercial Web sites, in general. In short, what are consumers' uses for, and associated gratifications in use of, commercial Web sites?

The Internet is experiencing phenomenal growth; it is growing so fast that researchers have a hard time simply keeping up with its current size and likely future growth. In previous years, the growth rate was estimated at between ten percent (Rubenstein, 1995) and twenty percent *per month* (Thomsen, 1997), with early estimates of the Internet audience suggesting that there were between 30 and 50 million users (Fox, 1995; Kambil, 1995). Audience size was expected to be near 150 million by the millennium (Barker & Groenne, 1997), but more current reports (Applegate, McFarlan & McKenney, 1999) placed 1995 audience levels at 40 million, with 100 million consumers logged on in 1998 and estimates of one billion Internet users by 2005. As of 1999, at least one home in four in the U.S. had Internet access (Clark, 1999), and the number of registered Internet commerce sites nearly tripled, from 600,000 to 1.7 million, in a one-year period monitored between 1996 and 1997 (Applegate et al., 1999).

This combined pattern of growth among both consumers and businesses in the use of the Internet underscores its obvious utility for making connections between buyers and sellers. The Web promises to be a potent marketing vehicle, combining the power of promotional communications with the instant gratification of on-line purchases. A better understanding of the motivations which bring consumers to specific sites and the uses consumers might make of those sites can assist marketers in the design of more effective and compelling offerings in the new Internet medium. Consequently, the overall purpose of this paper is to report a study that examines consumer motivations that drive Web site use.

MOTIVATIONS FOR WEB USE

Previous research suggests that motivations for the use of media, in general, tend to be dichotomous, split between what are known as process and content gratifications. The preference for media content (i.e., a content gratification) might be analogous to a television watcher who wishes to watch the nightly news to learn about local events, while television watchers who routinely video tape shows in order to enjoy the ability to fast forward through commercials in later viewing are motivated by the actual *use* of the medium—a process gratification (Stafford & Stafford, 1996). Correspondingly, in the Internet medium, some people may enjoy the *process* of randomly browsing the Web for enjoyment (Hoffman & Novak, 1996), while others may prefer to seek out and use specific Internet sites primarily to access site-related informational *content* (Stafford & Stafford, 1998). These are the modern analogs of process and content gratifications in the new Internet medium.

In the formative days of uses and gratifications research, McGuire (1974) noted that it seemed less important to know how a user came *to* a medium than to understand how the medium could *hold* a user once browsing had its intended effect, and Internet scholars voice this same concern with regard to the “holding power” of Web site content (Barker & Groenne, 1997). Hence, while browsing might be considered a general motivation for Internet use, what a commercial Web site specifically offers in terms of content appears to be a key factor that will determine if that site has influence with potential consumers.

USES AND GRATIFICATIONS FOR WEB SITES

In the Internet marketplace, understanding the motivations which bring consumers to a site, can be a success characteristic, since the “segment of one” approach can only be profitable if a marketer can reliably attract and serve *numerous* individual customers (Stafford & Stafford, 1998). Hence, knowledge of what consumers desire and benefit from in accessing commercial Web sites will provide Internet marketers with the ability to better [more profitably] serve their

audiences. To that end, uses and gratifications theory can be diagnostic in understanding consumer motivations for using the Web (Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996; Rafaeli, 1988).

Some say that the Web will simply serve as an additional tool to be integrated with traditional advertising and marketing processes (Peterson, Balasubramanian & Bronnenberg, 1997; Philport & Arbittier, 1997). Others consider the Internet to be a genuinely new medium for communication between buyers and sellers, and suggest that the uses and gratifications approach (U&G) will be useful for examining emerging trends in the commercial use of the Web (Eighmey, 1997b; Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996). U&G theory has already been demonstrated in business-to-business Internet applications (Eighmey, 1997a; 1997b), and preliminary U&G work on consumer Web site applications has shown much promise (e.g., Stafford & Stafford, 1998).

USES AND GRATIFICATIONS FOR MEDIA

The basic premise of the U&G paradigm focuses on what people do *with* the mass media (Klapper, 1963). It has long been known that individuals have particular motives for media use (Katz, 1959), and that individuals' media choices are motivated by particular self-defined uses and goals (Lin, 1977). In the case of the Internet, U&G provides the theoretical framework for understanding motivations that drive Web use.

The Active Audience

A basic tenet of uses and gratifications theory is the active audience (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974; Rubin, 1981), and this concept of active involvement is particularly important when investigating the emerging Internet medium, where communication is best conceptualized as a *reversed* flow, and the individual user controls the process by simple virtue of initiating access (Stafford & Stafford, 1998). To paraphrase Klapper, what people do with the Web is to use it to their own *personal* ends.

Active audiences are selective and make their own choices (Levy & Windahl, 1984), so understanding the activities prized by audience members is critical, since these activities are representative of the underlying motivations which influence selective and individual media access. Hence, the Web site marketer is best served by a clear understanding of those activities and motivations, which influence audience members who electronically access and use Internet resources. Audience activity is axiomatic in emerging Internet media—Web sites are *designed* for active use, since undirected viewing does not engage search engines or access information packets (Stafford & Stafford, 1998).

Content and Process Gratifications

As noted previously, motivations to access media are generally considered to be either content related or process related. Content gratification includes *use* of the messages

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