

# Maslow in the Digital Age

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## INTRODUCTION

The works of few individuals have impacted such a large variety of fields as the work of Abraham Maslow. His work describing human motivation in terms of needs and the priorities assigned to those needs has been cited by over 4,000 scholarly writers in a wide variety of disciplines including psychology, management, education, and theology. Although Maslow's work is founded on the most basic of human interactions, the recognition and fulfillment of needs, digital realities are altering human interaction patterns. Social morality and norms are still being defined for a technology that has advanced more rapidly than cultural conventions have evolved. As technology expands the varieties of human experience, how does the Internet support the individual satisfaction of needs as defined by Maslow?

## BACKGROUND

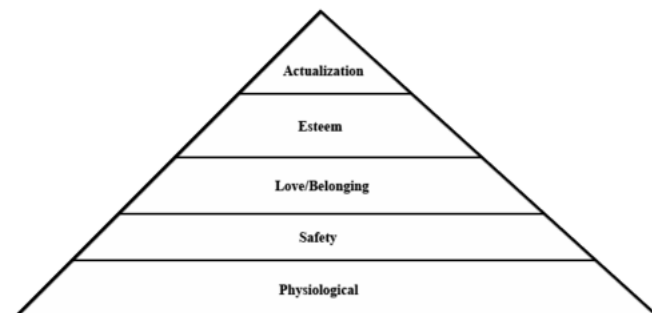
Maslow's humanistic theory forms a third perspective in psychology that offers an alternative to the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and the behaviorism of John Watson. Freud believed that human motivation was primarily directed by a need to reduce tension or

strife (Ewen, 1988). Maslow saw individuals progressing into higher states of consciousness as their needs were fulfilled. Unlike Watson, he believed that human motivation was based more on desire than on reaction to physical stimuli. Maslow interpreted human behaviors in a positive and active sense. Individuals actively move toward a goal rather than away from a punishment and are engaged in creating their lives, rather than passively responding to events.

Maslow's theory of human motivation, first published in July of 1943, described human motivation in terms of basic needs. He divided these needs into physiological needs, safety needs, love and belonging needs, esteem needs, and self-actualization needs (Maslow, 1943).

Although this is popularly perceived as a step-pyramid (Figure 1) where the needs at one level must be satisfied before progression to the next level, Maslow noted that there were exceptions to this hierarchy in which individuals seem to prefer one set of needs over others. He noted seven exceptions: (1) some individuals appear to value self-esteem more than love; (2) creative individuals appear to pursue creative endeavors even when their basic needs are not met; (3) some individuals who have experienced continual disappointments in life may be satisfied at lower levels; (4)

*Figure 1. Maslow's hierarchy of needs*



some people are unable to form relationships due to psychological damage; (5) some needs that have been met for a long period of time become less valued, and because of this undervaluation, a basic need might be sacrificed temporarily in preference to a higher order need; (6) not every individual will actively pursue their wishes; and (7) in some cases individuals will sacrifice everything for a cause becoming martyrs to that ideal (Maslow, 1943).

Maslow (1970) separates his list of needs into two groupings: deficiency needs and growth needs. Most deficiency needs, according to Maslow, are involved in an effort to maintain physiological and/or psychological homeostasis, or balance. He proposes that just as the human body automatically tries to maintain a constant, normal state, so the human organism attempts to maintain a constant emotional state. Children, for example, may cling to their parents during frightening events in an effort to maintain a sense of security while adults may be willing to forego their usual freedoms during a time of social turmoil in an effort to maintain their sense of security. Deficiency needs include the four lower levels of his pyramid: the physiological, the safety, the love/belonging, and the esteem needs. These needs, with the exceptions noted above, are hierarchical: only after a lower level need is met will an individual be aware of the next level need. Once a need is consistently met, it will no longer exist as a need, but, should it emerge again later on, it will once again be the dominant need and motivator of the individual (Maslow, 1970).

Once deficiency needs are satisfied, they are forgotten. This is not so with the growth needs that emerge next. Growth needs, even as they are filled, remain the motivating forces in the life of the individual. Once the deficiency needs are filled, the individual feels the need for self-actualization. What this is differs from person to person, as, according to Maslow, each person “must be true to his own nature” and to “become actualized in what he is potentially” (Maslow, 1970, p. 46). Whatever the individual’s goals, this growth stage includes cognitive needs, the needs to learn and understand, and a craving for truth, justice, and beauty (Maslow, 1970).

## **Criticisms**

Maslow’s work has been criticized for being optimistic about the basic nature of humanity and the need for

individuals to move toward improvement. As described by Kohn (1999), Maslow’s perspective appears to be based on a belief in good as part of his definition of the fully realized individual. In Maslow’s perspective, good and moral choices are defined as healthy behaviors, a position that equates morality with mental health (Kohn, 1999).

## **VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE VS. REALITY**

With the emergence of the Internet, individuals are given an entirely new stage on which to live their lives. This new environment is very different from that of the world observed by Maslow as he developed his hierarchy of needs. Virtual environments allow individuals to explore facets of their personality that they would be hesitant to reveal in less anonymous circumstances.

### **Physiological Needs**

The lowest levels of Maslow’s needs are the physiological needs. These include the basic life needs such as air, food, drink, shelter, warmth, sex, and sleep. Maslow (1943) points out that it would be impossible to list all the basic physiological needs, but he states that they take precedent over all other needs. If these basic physiological needs are not met, all the other needs are not important, or may never even be experienced by the individual.

Most of the physiological needs are biological needs that cannot be directly supported in the virtual world. The notable exceptions to this are sexual needs. Internet pornography is one of the largest industries on the Internet generating billions of dollars in revenue (Perdue, 2002). Sexual materials are available in a wide variety of formats ranging from photography to interactive formats in which two or more participants share sexually explicit messages resulting in a virtual intimate sexual experience (Biever, 2006; Coopersmith, 2006). The effects of these experiences often create negative effects creating marital conflict and distorted perceptions about marriage (Manning, 2006). Many spouses view participation in pornography and sexual chat rooms as a form of infidelity (Featherstone, 2005; Hertlein & Piercy 2006).

Maslow believed that most individuals would work toward fulfillment by progressing toward good or moral choices. At the crossroads of the Internet and reality,

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