

Motivations for Internet Use

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INTRODUCTION

In light of the importance the Internet has as a channel of commerce, it is important to understand consumer motivations for Internet use (Eighmey & McCord, 1998; Lohse & Spiller, 1998; Schonberg, Cofino, Hoch, Podlaseck, & Spraragen, 2000). In the absence of motivations for Internet use, there can be no motivations for e-commerce use, so Internet use motivations are an important antecedent to e-commerce activities (Stafford, 2003b). The Internet is a telecommunications medium, but it is also far more than a computer-mediated communication channel. In its evolution, the Internet evolved from a basic telecommunications network, to a consumer communications and entertainment medium, to a converged channel of commercial and telecommunications media that combine the utilities of familiar entertainment and communications media such as telephones, radio, and television, along with emerging computer network functionalities.

While remaining at its core a network for the distribution of information and telecommunications services, it has evolved into a combined channel for the delivery of other, richer media—become a medium of conveyance for many separate media delivered simultaneously, or a *meta-medium* (Stafford, Stafford, & Shaw, 2002). In the past, understanding Internet motivations strictly related to computer use was sufficient to characterize Internet user motivations, but in the converged meta-medium of the modern day, we should consider a wider range of potential uses and motivating gratifications arising from use of this complex and converged medium.

Media uses and gratifications (U&G) has been a useful theoretical platform for understanding Internet use in this emerging age of media convergence. This perspective focuses on the process of using the Internet medium, and the gratifications related to the content provided by the network. More recently, Internet U&G research has demonstrated additional motivations for Internet use that expand beyond the traditional usage process and media content motivations found in U&G studies of conventional media. These motivations span usage process and content to include considerations of social motivations for network usage, which is a gratification that traditional media have not generally been able to supply to users (Stafford et al., 2002). These new and emerging media usage gratifications for the Internet are important for site and service operators to understand, if they wish to success-

fully motivate customer use of and loyalty to their resource. These new motivations are potential differentiators between operators *within* the Internet medium as well as *between* the Internet and conventional promotional media.

BACKGROUND: MEDIA USAGE AND GRATIFICATIONS PERSPECTIVES

It has long been known that media usage is not a random or undirected activity; like all rational human behavior, there are discernable motivations for media use (Katz, 1959). Early U&G research in the radio and television era determined that audiences are not passive consumers of media (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974; Rubin, 1981), and this “active use” tenet of U&G research means that media researchers can find theoretically compelling approaches to simulate more involved media use, which is surely a beneficial outcome to the media and their commercial sponsors.

Media choice is motivated by individual uses and the individual goals related to those individual uses, which has come to be characterized as media usage “gratifications” (Lin, 1977). In this sense, media are like any other product or service that might be marketed to customers. In markets, even media markets, consumers make choices about what to use in an active and selective manner (Levy & Windahl, 1984). This means that media operators cannot presume a captive audience and must strive to understand their audience usage motivations in order to provide a compelling and attractive media experience. This perspective has come to be called the “niche theory” of media use, wherein consumer time for media use is a finite and limited resource that must be actively competed for by available media in product-market fashion, on the presumption that time spent by consumers with one media reduces available time to be spent with other competing media (e.g., Dimmick, Chen, & Li, 2004).

In the competitive scenario of media niche theory, understanding user motivations becomes all the more critical, as media must compete with each other for the available audience, and good understanding of user motivations provides more able competition for scarce audience resources. U&G theory has been quite useful in providing clear and effective profiles of media user motivations in traditional media in the past, as well as in the emerging Internet meta-medium (Eighmey, 1997; McDonald, 1997; Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996). In view of the multimedia aspect of the modern

Internet, it is considered that opportunities for user gratifications are greatly increased over traditional media (Dimmick et al., 2004); hence a clear understanding of Internet U&G will be useful for effective “niche-theory” marketing of the Internet medium to users.

Classic applications of U&G theory in the traditional media have consistently identified only two key areas of motivation for media use: media content uses and motivations (*gratifications*, in U&G parlance), and media usage process gratifications. Content gratifications concern the *messages* carried by the medium (which could be informative or entertaining), and process gratifications concern *actual use* of the medium, itself (Cutler & Danowski, 1980). The modern analogies would be the Web surfer, who is clearly motivated by the process of using the Internet, versus the highly focused online researcher, who is engaged in searches for very specific message content to support information needs (Stafford & Stafford, 2000).

U&G UP-TO-DATE

In research that has spanned the course of the past decade, an emerging stream of literature documenting Internet-specific media uses and gratifications is now reaching publication. Early research on U&G and the Internet was limited by the practice of adapting measurement scales for usage gratifications from television U&G studies (cf., Eighmey, 1997; Eighmey & McCord, 1998; Rafaeli, 1988). This was a useful transition stage approach for developing an initial understanding of the motivations of early Internet users, but the medium and its users have become far more sophisticated and complex in the intervening years.

Emerging Internet U&G research, which abandons traditional television-based measures and develops scales specifically tailored to the Internet experience, is based on the premise that Internet usage gratifications are different from the motivations that drive the use of other media (e.g., Stafford & Stafford, 1998). This article documents some of the more prominent findings in the process of developing these new Internet-specific U&G dimensions, as well as emerging “second-wave” Internet user motivation and behavioral studies.

The Initial Factors of Internet-Specific U&G

The initial approach to developing Internet-specific U&G profiles began with online qualitative research that sought to investigate the dimensionality of uses and gratifications; in classic measure development manner, Stafford and Stafford (2001a) leveraged their qualitative investigation of Web site users into an online user survey for purposes of identifying

new Internet-specific gratifications through multivariate analysis. Exploratory factor analysis identified five Internet-specific U&G factors: searching, cognitive, new and unique, social, and entertainment.

The searching factor was not unexpected and is certainly intuitive to experienced users of the Internet. The cognitive factor was characterized by gratifications related to learning: education, information, learning, and research. The factor “new and unique” was representative of the still-new feeling of the medium at the turn of the century, characterized by user perceptions of the medium that included qualities such as “ideas,” “interesting,” “new,” “progressive,” and “relaxing.” The entertainment factor (entertainment, fun, and games) was a media content gratification related to having fun with Internet site content. The social factor (chatting, friends, interaction, newsgroups, and people) was distinct in comparison to both traditional U&G dimensions of process and content gratifications, as well as early Internet applications of traditional U&G dimensions in exploratory research, since previous U&G research had never identified a social motivation for Internet use.

Applications of New Internet U&G Factors

With a newly identified social motivation for Internet use, important implications arise. Unlike any of the traditional media, the Internet can be considered as both an interpersonal and a mass exposure medium, with simultaneous gratifications along several mediated channels (Stafford & Stafford, 2001a).

Stafford’s (2001) confirmatory analysis of Internet U&G dimensions was applied to investigate Internet diffusion in the consumer market (Stafford, 2003b). Significant differences between innovation adoption categories were found for specific Internet U&G factors. Internet laggards, for example, exhibited the lowest social gratification for online services, while Internet “innovators” (or, early adopters) exhibited the highest social gratifications. Innovators also appeared to be significantly more motivated by content gratifications for Internet use. In a study of AOL users and their uses and gratifications for Internet use (Stafford, 2003a), heavy users also scored higher than light users for both process and social Internet usage gratifications. AOL users were strongly motivated by Web browsing and the guided search for information, in addition to their appreciation for social gratifications related to Internet communications functionality. Interestingly, among all the potential indicators related to U&G factors examined in analysis, online shopping did not appear to be highly gratifying to AOL users (Stafford & Gonier, 2004).

The impact of social gratifications for the Internet appears to be a function of user experience, and a rising generalization is that heavy Internet users are more motivated by

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