

# Uses and Gratifications for the World Wide Web

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## INTRODUCTION

It has always been important to understand what motivates consumers to use the Internet, since network use is a critical precursor to electronic commerce (Eighmey & McCord, 1998; Lohse & Spiller, 1998; Schonberg, Cofino, Hoch, Podlaseck & Spraragen, 2000). Without Internet use, there is no e-commerce use; this is much the same sort of issue that retailers study when trying to determine issues that motivate store visits. Internet use motivations, then, serve an important purpose in the understanding of e-commerce activities (Stafford, 2003b).

Technically speaking, the Internet has always been a communication medium, so we understand much of its functionality from the standpoint of its telecommunications utility. As we strive to understand motivations for its use, it is important to realize that the Internet is far more than a computer network; as the Internet evolves to become not only a telecommunications network, but also a consumer entertainment source, it gains the potential uses of familiar entertainment and communications media such as telephones, radio and television. The Internet remains a network for the distribution of information and telecommunications services, but it also becomes a channel for the delivery of other, richer media. In this sense, it has become a medium of media, or *meta-medium* (Stafford, Stafford & Shaw, 2002). Thus, where understanding the motivations related to computer use once was sufficient to diagnose Internet user motivations, we must now consider a wider range of potential uses and motivating gratifications arising from use of this complex and rich medium.

Early work on the uses and gratifications for Internet use centered on the process of using the network and the gratifications related to the content that the network provided. However, recent work indicates that additional motivations exist for Internet use, and these are important for site and service operators to understand, if they wish to successfully 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 (Stafford, Stafford & Shaw, 2002).

## BACKGROUND

It has been known for decades that individuals are motivated in their use of media; it is not a random or undirected activity (Katz, 1959), though it may occasionally seem so when one encounters the typical “couch potato” channel surfer or aimless “Web surfer.” Audiences are not passive consumers of media; they get involved (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974; Rubin, 1981), which means that understanding the motivations that lead to media use also provides the basis for engineering more involved media use – an outcome that is surely beneficial to media operators and their commercial sponsors.

Media choice, being motivated by individual uses and related goals – something we characterize as “gratifications” (Lin, 1977) – is much like any other product or service that might be marketed to users. Consumers make choices about what to use, and in their media choices, users are both active and selective in choice (Levy & Windahl, 1984). This means that media operators dare not assume a captive audience, and this assumption applies equally well in the mass media world of television and radio as it does in the online world of the Internet and its rich media sites. For that reason, the robust theoretical perspective of uses and gratifications, which has been used to study media since before the advent of commercial television, is useful in investigating the Internet since our media knowledge in one context is often useful in another (Eighmey, 1997; McDonald, 1997; Newhagen & Rafaeli, 1996).

Uses and gratifications theory (U&G) has to do with what people do with media and why they do it. Classic applications of U&G theory have consistently identified only two key areas of motivation for media use: media content uses and motivations for use (*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 five years, an emerging stream of literature documenting new Internet-specific U&G studies are now reaching publication. Previous Internet-related U&G research was useful, but authors had generally adapted measurement scales directly from television studies of uses and gratifications (cf., Eighmey, 1997; Eighmey & McCord, 1998; Rafaeli, 1988). The emerging stream of research began with the premise that motivations for Internet use might be different from the motivations that drive the use of other media, and that a new set of measures ought to be developed (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.

## **The Initial Factors of Internet U&G**

Stafford and Stafford (2001a) leveraged a qualitative study with HotWired site users into an AOL user survey to investigate the dimensionality of uses and gratifications for the Internet. Five Internet-specific U&G factors were identified: Searching, Cognitive, New and Unique, Social, and Entertainment. While searching certainly speaks for itself as an Internet activity, the cognitive factor was interesting, since it was characterized by descriptors related to learning: education, information, learning and research. The “new and unique” factor was characterized by descriptors such as ideas, interesting, new, progressive and relaxing; clearly a gratification factor, as opposed to a specific use. The social factor (chatting, friends, interaction, newsgroups and people) identified an exciting new possibility in U&G applications for the Internet, since previous U&G research had never identified a social motivation for media use. The entertainment factor (entertainment, fun and games) was clearly a content-based gratification related to having fun with Internet site content.

## **Applications of New Internet U&G Factors**

With the interpersonal social factor identified as an aspect of Internet usage motivation, the Internet can be considered as both an interpersonal and a mass exposure medium, with simultaneous commercial and noncommercial opportunities to users (Stafford & Stafford, 2001a). Stafford's (2001) confirmatory analysis of emerging Internet U&G issues produced U&G factors that were applied in a study of Internet use and diffusion among the consumer market (Stafford, 2003b), examining differences between early and late Internet adopters; there were significant

differences between each adoption category on specific Internet U&G factors. Internet laggards exhibited the lowest social gratification for online services, while Internet “innovators” (or, early adopters) exhibited the highest social gratifications. Innovators also produced significantly higher content gratification scores, as compared to laggards.

It began to appear, as a process of developing and applying specific U&G dimensions for Internet users, that the impact of social gratifications might be largely a function of user experience. A general expectation emerged which specified that heavy Internet service users are more motivated by social gratifications than light users (Stafford, Stafford & Shaw, 2002). To the extent that heavy users are desirable consumer targets for ISPs, verification of this supposition could have valuable implications for practice.

This presumption was tested in another AOL survey (Stafford, 2003a), and for all of the variables comprising both process and social Internet usage gratifications, heavy users scored higher than light users. Hence, heavy users can be expected to be more motivated in their Internet use specifically on the social dimension – a finding that resonates with unrelated Internet research on user demographics (e.g., Emmannouildes & Hammond, 2000) – but also any other U&G dimension, as well. Heavier users have more specific uses and find more enjoyment in the Internet usage process than do light users, it seems.

Internet U&G factors have also been applied to understand Web use in the distance education classroom (Stafford, 2003c; Stafford & Stafford, 2003). In this study of student motivations for use of distance course Internet resources, social gratifications were dominant, accounting for 70% of the variance. It is generally agreed that students on the remote end of a distance education teleconference feel somewhat socially removed and isolated from colleagues in the live origination section of the class (cf., Berger & Topol, 2001; Hamer, 2001). Internet technology has been shown to ameliorate the inherent social isolation of a distance course, and that consideration seems to be confirmed in the strong showing of the social factor in this specific distance education application (Stafford, 2003c).

Since much of the initial development of U&G dimensions for Internet use came from samples of AOL users, one recent study made an effort to understand specific characterizations of AOL users for their Internet activities. AOL users appear to be highly gratified by activities characterized by Web browsing and the guided search for information, and AOL users also appreciate communications-related Internet uses, and have clear social gratifications for Internet use. Interestingly, among all the potential indicators related to U&G factors examined in

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