

Course Name: Communication Theories-II

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Uses and Gratifications Theory

Introduction

Uses and gratifications theory of mass communication talks about the importance and active part of the people as consumers or audience of media content. This theory focuses on *why* people use particular media rather than concentrating on contents presented by media. Most of the theories related to field of media and communication discuss the effects of media in narrow and broader spectrum while this theory distinct itself from others by giving an understanding of why and how people actively choose some media to gratify their needs.

Uses and gratifications is basically an audience-centered approach by pointing its focus on “what do people do with the media?” instead of the traditional researches which focus on “what media do with the people (hypodermic view of media)?”

This theory shifted attention from the message makers of the mass communication process to the message receivers, the audience. This approach works with the point of view that there is a variety of responses to media messages and people are capable of making up their own minds, accepting some messages, rejecting others and use the media for variety of reasons in different ways at different times.

Background

Uses and gratifications approach arose originally in the 1940s and underwent a revival in the 1970s and 1980s. In the late 1930s and early 1940s quiz shows were considered as famous among people who listens radio and Herza Herzog diverted the attention by simply asking a question that why a wide variety of people is interested in this kind of shows? Herzog contradict the traditional approach of powerful media effects and considered “the notion that different audience members might listen to a radio show for different reasons”. Herzog’s research and Mcquail, Blumler and Brown's findings came to a common conclusion that people listens quiz shows for the purpose of self rating, social interaction, excitement and educational appeal.

Assumptions of theory

Uses and gratification theory clearly depicts the importance of media consumers and termed them as active media users who get exposed to any media content with their own consent. This approach has uniqueness in its nature as compare to other traditional approaches. The assumptions of U & G are:

- The audience is active.
- Audience is goal oriented.
- Audience member has choice to gratify his/her need by choosing medium according to his/her consent.
- Different types of media compete against each other and against other sources of gratification for viewers' attention.
- The medium that provides the most satisfaction for a person will be used more often than other types.
- People are well aware of their media use and their interests.
- Value judgments of media content can only be assessed by the audience.

The first formal statement of the uses and gratifications theory came from Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch in 1974 which is that **“Uses and gratifications focused on the social and psychological origins of needs which generate expectations of the mass media or other sources which lead to differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities) resulting in need gratifications and other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones”**.

According to their research, the audience goals for media use can be as given below:

1. be informed or educated
2. identify with characters of the situation in the media environment
3. simple entertainment
4. enhance social interaction

5. escape from the stresses of daily life

They also proposed several needs for media consumption which are classified into following five categories:

Cognitive needs: Media is used by people for acquiring information and knowledge. It is also used to develop better understanding of various concepts and issues, for example people watching documentaries, news analysis reports on current affairs etc.

Affective needs: People use media for seeking pleasure or to satisfy emotional needs, for example, watching music videos, movies, dramas etc.

Personal integrative needs: Sometimes we use media to acquire credibility and reassure our status. This is the self-esteem need, for example people get to improve their status by watching media advertisements and buy products to change their life style and media helps them to do so.

Social integrative needs: Internet and social media are normally used to satisfy this need which is to integrate and connect with family or friends, for example, using e-mails, chat rooms or other social networking sites to link up and socialize.

Tension release needs: Media is used for catharsis i.e., for the release of pent-up emotions as this provides some relief and relaxation. It is also used as a medium of diversion from the routine life and for escapism, for example, watching comedy movies, reading novels, comics etc.

What Gratifications are Sought and Obtained from Media?

Gratification sought are those gratifications which the consumer or audience need while the gratification obtained are those gratifications which they get from the media.

Denis McQuail in 1987 described the common reasons and ways due to which active media audiences use media for the purpose of gratifying their needs.

Information

- Finding out about relevant events and conditions in immediate surroundings, society and the world.
- Seeking advice on practical matters, or opinion and decision choices.
- Satisfying curiosity and general interest.
- Learning, self-education.
- Gaining a sense of security through knowledge.

Personal identity

- Finding reinforcement for personal values.
- Finding models of behavior.
- Identifying with valued others (in the media).
- Gaining insight into one's self.

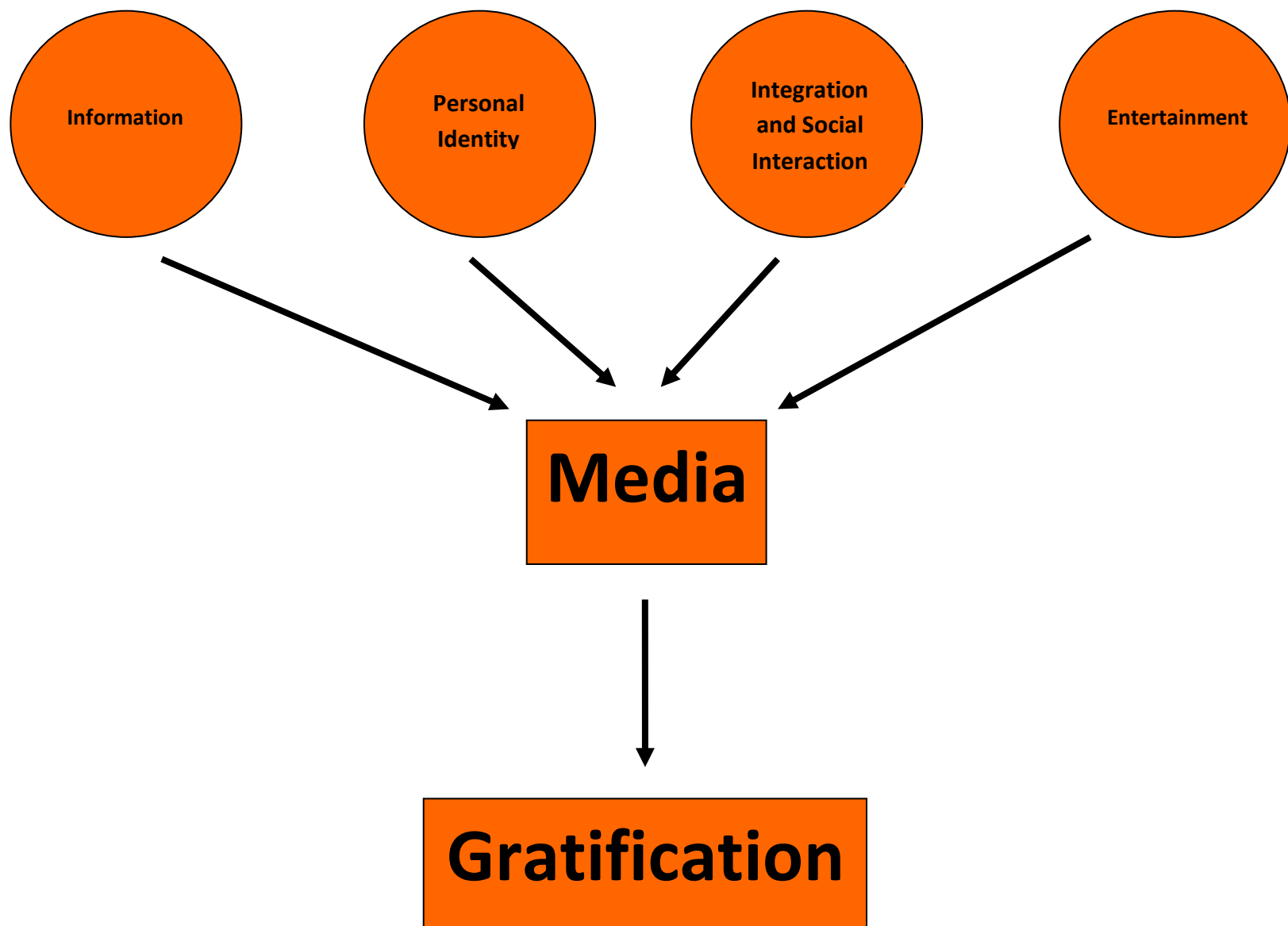
Integration and social interaction

- Gaining insight into circumstances of others: social empathy.
- Identifying with others and gaining a sense of belonging.
- Finding a basis for conversation and social interaction.
- Having a substitute for real life companionship.
- Helping to carry out social roles.
- Enabling one to connect with family, friends and society.

Entertainment

- Escaping, or being diverted from problems.
- Relaxing.
- Getting intrinsic cultural or aesthetic enjoyment.
- Filling time.
- Emotional release.
- Sexual arousal.

Sometimes there arise a difference in what an individual want from media and what he get from media? Mick Jagger argues that “you cannot always get what you want”. According to him, gratifications sought can be distinct from gratifications obtained.



How are Media used in the Gratification Process?

After the construction of typology of gratifications on part of audience, researchers started investigating the processes through which audience gratifications influence behavior and outcomes. Kim and Rubin (1997) presented three ways in which audience activity facilitates media effects.

1. **Selectivity:** In selectivity, people give themselves exposure of particular media content.
Example: People who select Geo News program Capital Talk to know about Pakistan's stance on Indians intolerance.
2. **Attention:** People put cognitive efforts in form of attention to specific media to gratify their specific need.
Example: People than pay attention and listen carefully what the experts have to say on Indo-Pak relations.
3. **Involvement:** Sometimes people take so much interest in some media message that they even develop a relationship with the characters.
Example: In Waqar Zaka's show 'living on the edge', people were supporting one of its contestant name as Akhtar.

Modern Applications of Uses and Gratifications Theory

Today we can see applications of uses and gratifications theory in almost every field of life. By observing the use of technology in the world one can easily understand the usefulness and authenticity of uses and gratifications theory. Some prominent applications of U & G theory are as follows:

Research: Researchers in field of mass communication often utilize uses and gratification theory for research purposes to explain the different dimensions of the media use by people and to describe the social and economic context of needs on part of people.

For example, Brown & Lauricella & Douai & Zaidi (2012) in their research article name as “Consuming Television Crime Drama: A Uses and Gratifications Approach” published in *American Communication Journal* used uses and gratifications theory and concluded that curiosity and information are two actual needs due to which young people watch crime dramas.

Mobile Phones: In today’s era, mobile phones have now become a basic need of the society. People use mobile phones for immediate access, fashion/status, entertainment, interaction, affection and mobility.

Like, fever of T20 World Cup going on now a days, and people are so obsessed that they have subscribed cellular companies’ cricket alerts to stay updated.

Television: Television enables us to have freedom and escape from all our worries having remote control in our hands to watch different content as we desire. People watch television for relaxation and for this purpose they especially dig out some time from their daily routine lives.

For example, Bulbulay – a comedy drama serial on ARY Digital is a source of entertainment for large number of people.

Radio: Radio is used extensively for information gaining purpose and for community development. People listen different radio contents to gratify their different needs such as information, entertainment etc.

For instance, farmers in rural areas of Pakistan listen radio especially for the sake of updates regarding weather and which fertilizers to use for production purposes.

Internet: Internet allows us to identify more people and internet has made it possible to search for anything which comes in our minds. Internet has developed our education massively by launching different sites with the help of which we can get the required information. Social networking websites have enabled us to interact with people sitting anywhere in the world. Particulars under socialization might be finding old friends, making new friends, learning about events, creating social functions, and feeling connected. For the purpose of enjoyment and having sense of achievement, online gaming is also in trend these days. All the needs of social interaction, social belongingness is properly being gratified by the internet.

Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Google, Youtube, Wikipedia, Google scholar and many more are popular examples of internet usage.

Critics on Uses and Gratifications Theory

- ✚ In 2002, James Lull criticized the basic assumption of uses and gratifications theory i.e. people seek out media to gratify their needs by pointing out that audiences do not always benefit from the use of media and moreover they do not take media consumption willingly and independently.
- ✚ Swanson in 1992 has criticized the uses and gratifications theory for having specifically audience-centered approach by ignoring strong effects of media on people.
- ✚ A strong limitation of this theory comes from one of its developers E. Katz who in 1987 admitted the doubtful nature of the study itself. Since the theory investigated from media users by relying on their memories which can be distorted due to external influences.
- ✚ Some researchers also argue that U & G approach is individualistic and completely ignore the socio-cultural context.
- ✚ Positive point of the uses and gratifications theory is it focuses attention on individuals in the mass communication process.

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