
The Evolution of Audience Uses and Gratifications: A Journey Through Media Engagement

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of uses and gratifications research, a paradigm that emerged in response to earlier theories of media's absolute influence. Shifting the focus from what media do to audiences toward what audiences actively do with media, the article offers a qualitative and chronological analysis of the key conceptual, methodological, and empirical developments in this field. It critically examines the contributions of leading scholars and major studies that have shaped the trajectory of this research tradition. The findings suggest that the development of uses and gratifications research can be divided into three distinct phases. The first phase, beginning in the 1940s, marks the foundational studies that established the initial framework. The second phase emerged in the 1970s, when uses and gratifications matured into a more coherent and recognized research approach. The third phase, beginning in the early 1990s, reflects a shift toward investigating how audiences engage with new media, especially following the rise of the Internet as a dominant form of mass communication.

Keywords: Evolution, Media Research, Uses and Gratifications Theory, Audience Engagement.

Introduction

Uses and gratifications research focuses on understanding how individuals engage with media and communication technologies, aiming to explore the relationship between media use and the gratifications audiences seek and obtain through that use. Proponents of this approach argue that media consumption can best be understood by examining the purposes audiences have for turning to specific media, as well as the outcomes they derive from such engagement.

This perspective emerged as a critical response to the early *strong effects* theories that dominated media research in the first half of the 20th century. By challenging the notion of media's absolute power over passive audiences, the uses and gratifications approach introduced a new conceptual framework that reoriented the core question in media studies from "What do media do to people?" to "What do people do with media?". This shift also transformed how the audience itself was perceived—from a passive, powerless recipient of media messages to an active, selective, and goal-driven participant in the communication process.

The redefinition of the audience as conscious, engaged, and empowered led to a new understanding of media use as a process governed by individual needs and intentional choices. Audiences were now seen as capable of navigating the media landscape to fulfill specific personal, informational, or emotional goals. In turn, this change forced media producers to adapt continuously in order to satisfy the demands of a more discerning and dynamic audience, particularly in light of the rapid expansion and diversification of media technologies and platforms. These advancements have provided users with greater freedom, more diverse choices, and increasingly complex patterns of media engagement.

Against this backdrop, the present article raises several key questions: How did uses and gratifications research originate? What stages has it gone through? What role have researchers played in its development? And how have rapid technological changes in media and communication influenced the trajectory of this research tradition?

1. The Emergence of Uses and Gratifications Research

Uses and gratifications research did not emerge in a theoretical vacuum; rather, it was the product of accumulated knowledge and the contributions of numerous scholars who laid its conceptual foundations. This research orientation arose from a growing awareness of individual differences, social variability, and behaviors associated with media use, prompting a reconsideration of the relationship between audiences and media. Audiences began to be seen as active agents who selectively choose messages and content based on their preferences. Simultaneously, this approach offered a counterpoint to the dominant ideas presented by the *hypodermic needle theory* and the *two-step flow theory*, both of which had portrayed the audience as passive and powerless. “Researchers began to examine these perspectives in search of a model or comprehensive theory that could explain the relationship between media use and the gratifications derived from it” (1).

There were two main factors behind the emergence of uses and gratifications research. The first was the opposition to the assumption of media's powerful effects on audiences—a critical shift that represented a kind of “discovery” of the audience, particularly within the American context. The second factor lay in the fact that this new framework proposed an alternative perspective on the relationship between media content and audiences. It also introduced a new way of

categorizing media content based on its function, rather than relying on audience appreciation or engagement levels resulting from exposure to media (2).

The origins of uses and gratifications research date back to the 1940s, specifically during World War II. It emerged “as a reaction to the media studies of the time, which subscribed to the belief in the direct and powerful influence of communication on the receiving public—a belief dominant at the start of the twentieth century” (3). This perspective held that media messages had a linear (vertical) impact, where each individual responded directly and uniformly to the content, much like a syringe injecting medication into a patient’s bloodstream (4). It also assumed that the audience was immediately and uniformly affected by the media they consumed, reflecting the traditional American empirical studies of that era, “which viewed the receiver as passive and unable to resist media messages based on their individual needs and desires. Instead, it was believed that media messages determined the audience’s response” (5). This called for a shift in perspective—toward “recognizing the impact of individual differences and social variability on media-related behavior” (6).

The 1940s are often referred to as the golden age of uses and gratifications research. During this period, a wealth of data emerged regarding media use and the gratifications it generated. The concept of the audience as an active participant deepened, and research began to focus on how people use media and how they fulfill their needs through this usage. Thus, this approach represented a significant qualitative shift in media research and came to be known as part of modern media studies. Nevertheless, the development of this approach was initially slow, due to the dominance of effects-oriented research both before and after the Second World War.

Studies based on individual differences received limited attention, and the early stages of uses and gratifications research lacked a coherent theoretical framework (7).

The true breakthrough in uses and gratifications theory came with Elihu Katz's 1959 study, which shifted the analytical focus from media messages themselves to the audience receiving them. This challenged the prevailing belief that audience behavior toward media was shaped merely by habit, rather than logical or personal reasons (8). Katz emphasized that the initial phase of this approach aimed to provide a deep descriptive account of how media outlets function and how they offer a variety of content choices. However, early descriptive studies suffered from a lack of conceptual clarity and appropriate research methods (9).

A more fully articulated vision of the uses and gratifications approach emerged in 1974 with the publication of *The Uses of Mass Communications* by Katz and Blumler. The book's core premise focused on identifying the functions of media and its content, alongside the motivations that drive individual exposure. While the approach has faced criticisms, its contribution to communication studies remains significant—particularly in shifting scholarly attention away from the content itself (“Who says what?”) toward the audience (“To whom?”), who uses that content under specific conditions and within specific contexts (10).

Since then, the uses and gratifications perspective has evolved significantly, driven by advances in modern communication technologies and the increasing richness of media content. This development is reflected in the vast number of studies conducted across different parts of the world, either building on the original foundations or reevaluating some of the approach's core assumptions.

The First Generation of Uses and Gratifications Research:

The origins of uses and gratifications research date back to the 1940s and 1950s, through several foundational studies that laid the groundwork for this research approach. One of the earliest and most significant was **Herzog's** 1941 study on the gratifications audiences derive from listening to a radio quiz show (*Quiz*), in which she used opinion polling techniques. Her findings revealed that respondents experienced various types of gratification, including competition, education, and self-assessment. She concluded that radio programs could fulfill certain psychological needs for their audiences(11).

In a follow-up study in 1942, Herzog investigated the experience of listening to daily radio soap operas(12). Surveying 2,500 female listeners, she found that 21% listened primarily for entertainment, while 41% reported that the programs helped them navigate daily life by offering advice on interpersonal relationships (with spouses, children, family, or friends) and on how to act in specific life situations. She ultimately identified key gratifications provided by soap operas: emotional release, escapism through daydreaming, and guidance in socially appropriate behavior(13).

In 1945, **Berelson** conducted a study that took advantage of a two-week suspension in the publication of eight newspapers due to a distribution strike in New York(14). He interviewed readers about what they missed during this period and found that those most invested in daily news experienced a strong sense of loss, which even affected their interpersonal relationships. Berelson concluded that newspapers serve as a vital source of psychological security for many individuals.

In 1948, **Warner and Henry** explored similar territory through their study on daily radio soap operas(15), discovering that one of the core gratifications audiences gained from these programs was assistance in compensating for social shortcomings.

By the late 1940s, **Lasswell and Wright** had established a functionalist framework for media research. Lasswell identified three main functions of the media: surveillance of the environment, correlation of societal components in response to the environment, and transmission of social heritage from one generation to another. **Wright** later added a fourth function: entertainment.

In 1949, **Wolf and Fiske** conducted a study on children's comic strips and identified three main functions these comics served: the presentation of an invincible hero, the opportunity for identification with that hero, and the provision of information about the real world(16). Each function corresponded to different developmental stages and was linked to specific growth-related needs. However, they also found that excessive comic consumption correlated with signs of nervous tendencies and certain physical impairments(17).

By 1955, after numerous studies, **Katz** posed a critical question: rather than asking, "What do media do to people?", researchers should ask, "What do people do with media?" This marked a pivotal shift in focus. In 1959, Katz emphasized that media research should concentrate on how audiences engage with media rather than on how media affect audiences(18). He argued that the prevailing belief in powerful, direct media effects had become outdated.

This change in perspective was later reinforced by **Klapper**, who, in his influential 1960 book *The Effects of Mass Communication*, concluded that media are rarely a sufficient or necessary

cause for audience effects. Instead, media work through a series of mediating factors and variables that support, reinforce, or channel the effects(19). These mediating factors include opinion leaders, primary social groups, and selective exposure, whereby individuals tend to engage with media content that aligns with their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes.

The Second Generation of Uses and Gratifications Research:

A landmark contribution to the formulation of uses and gratifications theory came from the 1972 study conducted by **Blumler, McQuail, and Brown**(20) at the Television Research Center at the University of Leeds. In this study, the researchers aimed to move beyond the concept of "escapism"—a notion often emphasized by critics of popular culture—and demonstrated that media use extends well beyond mere escape. Focusing primarily on television, their core research question was: *How do audiences describe their personal experiences with media?* and *What specific functions do certain media contents serve in particular contexts?* To answer these questions, they developed a set of hypotheses and ultimately identified the general dimensions of uses and gratifications research(21).

In the early 1980s, **Katz** conducted a study on cultural differences in interpreting the American TV series *Dallas*, which had become a symbol of American television globalization at the time. The study aimed to explore how the show was understood and interpreted differently across various cultural contexts. Katz found that audience responses to the series varied significantly based on cultural backgrounds, offering strong evidence for the influence of cultural context on media interpretation(22).

In 1981, **Rosengren and Windahl** proposed a series of classifications relating media content to audience behavior and media functions. Unlike earlier studies that focused primarily on television, their work analyzed a broader range of media. They revisited earlier concepts such as escapism, daydreaming, and parasocial interaction, and emphasized that individuals have biological, psychological, social, and cultural needs. These needs can be fulfilled either through natural (non-media) functions or through media, which serve as alternative means for gratification(23)(24).

Austin, in a 1986 study, identified seven motivational factors that drive audiences to go to the cinema: learning and information, forgetting and escapism, enjoyment and time-passing, alleviation of loneliness, serving as a behavioral refuge, and self-discovery. For radio, Austin found that the main motivations were information and entertainment. However, when it came to newspaper readers, the main drivers aligned with those identified by McQuail and his colleagues: entertainment, surveillance, and interaction(25).

In 1988, **Payne, Severn, and Dozier** investigated audience gratifications through the same three dimensions introduced by McQuail and colleagues: entertainment, surveillance, and interaction. They discovered that general-interest magazines were primarily read for entertainment, while readers of trade magazines were motivated more by the needs for surveillance and interaction(26).

In 1995, **Rubin and Rubin** identified five personal communication motives in their study of interpersonal communication: enjoyment, inclusion, affection, control, and escape from reality. These motives appeared to be more associated with internal psychological drivers than with the external functional categories typically used in mass communication studies(27)(28). Notably,

Rubin had already observed in 1983 that scholars within the uses and gratifications framework had begun responding to the criticisms leveled against the theory. He concluded that researchers were developing a more refined methodology and adapting their studies by integrating comparative analyses of separate investigations. Media use was increasingly being approached as a holistic communicative and social phenomenon.

Examples of such developments include **Eastman's** 1979 analysis of the multivariate relationships between television viewing functions and lifestyle characteristics; **Jeffres and Ostman's** 1980 study on motivations for TV viewing and their predictability based on lifestyle traits and viewing patterns; and **Palmgreen's** 1982 investigation into the differences in motives for watching general versus specific types of television programming(29).

Uses and Gratifications Research in New Media

Since the early 1990s, the internet has evolved into a mass communication tool. Scholars in the field of communication have actively sought to understand the rapid changes introduced by new media—its interactivity, hypertextuality, multimedia nature, and the shifts in user behavior and media effects. One significant theoretical framework applied in this context is the *Uses and Gratifications Theory*, which had proven effective in analyzing traditional media.

Early Western Studies

One of the early studies by Perse and Dunn (30) examined how people used home computers alongside other media to satisfy a wide range of needs. They identified motivations such as seeking information, entertainment, relaxation, social interaction, and filling time. Their findings showed that only a small portion of users saw the computer as a primary source for

current events, entertainment, or reducing loneliness. However, with the rise of online news websites, scholars began to focus on the demographics and motivations of these users (31).

Zhang et al. (32) found that users of social networks like Facebook reflected America's demographic diversity. They differentiated between *external pressures* (e.g., site features like birthday reminders) and *internal motivations* (e.g., social integration). Another study by Zhang, using email surveys, grouped motivations for visiting online news sites into three categories: medium characteristics (e.g., immediacy, availability), user exposure patterns, and access convenience. Interestingly, **interactivity**, often seen as a defining feature of the internet, ranked low among reasons for visiting news sites. Similarly, Gallup surveys revealed that **younger users** accessed the internet for diverse activities (e.g., news, socializing, gaming), while **older users** prioritized news and information.

Boyd and Ellison (34) defined social networking sites (SNS) as web-based platforms enabling users to create profiles, connect with others, and navigate social ties. Their study confirmed a **positive correlation between Facebook use and social capital**—defined as the resources available through social connections. Early SNS studies focused on identity disclosure, online friendships, and privacy, while more recent research has shifted to understanding how **personal traits** influence SNS usage.

One comparative study found that **Facebook** is better at fulfilling *entertainment and social exploration* needs, whereas **text messaging** is more aligned with *maintaining existing relationships*. Scholars have also examined how SNS use enhances or diminishes social capital. Facebook enables users to share personal updates and receive feedback, though most users interact more with existing friends than with new contacts. Researchers differentiate between

strong ties (close friends) and *weak ties* (casual acquaintances), with both contributing differently to social capital.

SNS use can also **reduce feelings of loneliness**, particularly when users actively engage (e.g., posting, liking). Passive usage, however, may increase isolation. Hugh (40) categorized SNS use motivations into nine themes, including relationship maintenance, self-expression, and reputation management.

Arab World Contributions

Arab scholars have also explored these issues. Al-Assimi (42), in a study on Saudi youth, found that **entertainment use** (games, music, emotional images) was dominant. Cultural benefits included greater global awareness and information access, while educational uses were limited to aiding research and communication. Economically, internet use led to higher spending on entertainment.

Baaziz (43) studied **online chat forums**, noting their popularity among 15–25-year-olds. Arabic was the dominant language, followed by English and French. Most users preferred nighttime chats and favored partners based on education level, gender, country, and language. While many preferred real-life relationships, online chatting helped reduce loneliness.

Abu Bakr (44), in a study on **YouTube use among teenagers**, found that users mainly accessed the platform at home or in cafes. Motivations included watching news and entertainment videos, as well as accessing programs missed on television.

Al-Tamimi (45) explored **youth usage of new media**, emphasizing their high daily internet exposure and the internet's influence in reducing dependence on traditional media. Ritualistic motivations included spending time with friends and tracking their news, while key gratifications included **interaction and engagement** with others' opinions.

Results and Recommendations

The researcher concluded that the development of audience uses and gratifications research can be divided into three main stages:

- **The first stage** began in the early 1940s and extended to the late 1950s. During this period, studies sought to identify the reasons and motives behind the audience's use of various media and their content. Most of the research in this phase was published during World War II and employed similar methodological approaches.

- **The second stage** started in the early 1960s and is characterized by the development of models of audience uses and gratifications. Studies during this phase revealed correlational relationships between individuals' media use and the satisfaction of their needs. Most research in this stage, which lasted until the late 1980s, was field-based.

- **The third stage** began in the early 1990s, marked by new forms of audience uses and gratifications arising from remarkable advancements in media and communication technologies, as well as the increasing public shift towards new media at the expense of traditional media. This shift led to the emergence of new concepts both at the media level and the audience level.

It can be said that the uses and gratifications approach has attracted significant attention from researchers and scholars studying media audiences. However, this interest has not produced genuine research development that keeps pace with technological advances in media and communication. It is necessary to move beyond the limited application of the uses and gratifications approach—often confined to identifying motivations for use and gratifications obtained—and work towards developing new research directions. These directions should be able to incorporate the vast thematic accumulation resulting from audiences' use of new media.

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