

Analyzing The Current TV Viewing Patterns Of Audiences In Light Of The Uses And Gratification Theory

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ABSTRACT

Happiness is an integral part of human existence. Even the World Health Organization is laying greater emphasis on happiness as an important component of health. Our happiness quotient is determined by a variety of intermingling factors that include hormonal transitions, health, wealth and also our surroundings. Apart from these factors that influence our happiness, we often deliberately indulge in activities and actions that make us feel happy like sports, exercise, spending time with friends, reading books, listening to music, watching television or the like. Since the past two decades Media has occupied a greater space in our lives. The trending social media platforms have transformed the entire process and impact of communication. Similarly, the mushrooming FM channels supported by the smart phone technology have become the new interpersonal medium for those commuting through a public transport. Several studies in the past have established that people tend to use Mass Media for fulfillment of some needs or gratifications that may range from obtaining information to seeking entertainment and relaxation. However, with the changing media scenario, the gratifications sought and obtained have also changed. This paper elaborates the Uses and Gratification theory of Media and through review of literature, attempts to understand the different types of gratifications or happiness sought by the people through media consumption.

Keywords : Uses and Gratification, Media and Individual Needs, Media and Information, Social Interaction and Media

Introduction

Most of the media studies in the initial days of media evolution concentrated on 'What media does to the audience.' The Magic Bullet theory or Hypodermic Needle theory that emerged in mid 1930's assumed that media messages are like magic bullets which are shot directly at the viewers who agree to these messages without any personal discretion. With the growing dominance of Media, emerged the Cultivation Theory developed by George Gerbner and Larry Gross in 1967 and Agenda Setting theory proposed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw in 1972, both of which emphasized that media creates dominant images in the minds of its audience. However, with the introduction of satellite television there came a plethora of channels and programs, each competing for individual attention. This

provided the audience with an option to selectively expose themselves to the programs that coincided with their individual preferences and opinions. Thereafter the media theorists started focusing on 'What audiences do with the media.'

This led to the emergence of several path breaking media theories including Uses and Gratification theory which still remains the most viable theory for explaining the impact of media exposure. This theory has been applied to interpret the impact of a wide range of conventional mass mediums as well as interpersonal communication and is now being used extensively to interpret the impact of Internet. Uses and Gratification theory assumes that audiences actively seek out media in a goal directed way that provides them with the means of gratifying a wide variety of needs. (Katz, Blunder,

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Gurevitch, 1974; Palmgreen et al. 1985). This approach focuses on why people use a particular media rather than on the content being offered by that media. Some researchers have also opined that media exposure helps to shape the needs and expectations of the audience.

This theory was originally conceived in 1940s and underwent a revival in the 1970s and 1980s. This theory offers a functionalist approach to media consumption and presents the use of media in terms of the gratification of social or psychological needs of the individual (Blumler and Katz, 1974). The gratification so desired may be obtained from a medium's content (by watching a specific program like Big Boss), from familiarity with a specific genre of programs within a medium (By watching Sitcoms on different TV channels like Tarak Mehta Ka Ooltah Chashma on Sab TV, Bhabhi ji ghar par hai on & TV and Sumit Sambhal Lega on Star Plus) and from social benefits of media consumption (by watching TV with family). It is also an established fact that the same media content may satisfy different gratification needs among people and also that the emotional status of the people may drive them towards different media content. Zillmann (cited by McQuail 1978: 236) has shown the influence of mood on media choice. He indicated that boredom encourages a person to watch exciting content while stress encourages a person to opt for relaxing content on the same medium. Apart from moods, the gratifying needs of the individuals are also associated with their individual personality, level of maturity, social and cultural backgrounds and also their social roles.

This theory fell out of fervor with the mass communication scholars for several decades but the advent of telecommunications technology has revived it from its dormancy. More studies are being undertaken now to access the relevance and application of this theory on the current media scenario. In the late 70's Dennis McQuail (McQuail 1987:73) enlisted the common gratifications desired by the audience from a medium. However we find that the media too has changed and altered itself to fulfill these needs of the audience. Therefore, here we attempt to understand how media has been changing its form and content according to the gratifications sought by the audience. The common

gratifications desired from a particular medium as elaborated by Dennis McQuail are:

Information

A large number of people use media to stay informed about their surroundings. Their main purpose of using any form of media is to know about important events and issues pertaining to their immediate surroundings, to the society and the world. People also use media to form an opinion, make a decision or seek advice. Another major purpose of media consumption is curiosity and general interest. While evaluating the gratifications need of the audience, the researchers also found that people get a sense of security by the knowledge gained through media. Thus, it is commonly said 'Knowledge is Power.' This perceived gratification expected from the media has led to an increased number of channels offering news and analysis to the people. The last decade has been marked by a proliferation of news channels. The number of news channels increased from 11 in 2002, to 36 in 2006. India is one of the few countries in the world which can boast of the size of its news channels. Moreover, the trend in India is to create genres and subgenres of news programs which spread into a number of languages and regions (B.R. Kumar, 2014) NDTV, Star News, ABP News, AajTak, Sahara Samay etc. are some popular news channels operating in India. The growing interest of the people in the economic situation of the country and the desire for updated financial information has resulted in the emergence of popular business channels like CNBC Awaaz, ZEE Business, NDTV Profit etc. that provide financial information to the viewers. In the print media too the number of newspapers and periodicals as well as magazines catering to the specialized information needs of the readers published in Hindi, English and several regional languages have increased manifold. While magazines like India Today, Outlook, Frontline update the readers on current affairs and happenings, there are also certain specialized magazines that provide information and knowledge on a variety of subjects. The newer mediums of communication like social networking platforms are also being used by the audience for information as revealed by the Pew Research Center's

Journalism Report examining the landscape of American journalism.

Personal Identity

People tend to be more inclined to the medium which reaffirms their beliefs and perceptions and avoid communications that challenge their predisposed opinions. Thus, another major gratification desired from the media by the common man is reinforcement of their personal identity. The flavor of traditional Indian attires, customs, dialects and rituals can be clearly seen in the TV Soaps aired on various TV Channels. Even the Indian Advertising industry uses themes related to human emotions and relationships to attract a larger target audience. Even the much controversial 'stereotyped' image of women is quite popular on the Indian Television as the society identifies with it. Another gratification desired by the audience is gaining insight into one's inner self. This has led to the popularity of religious and spiritual channels like Aastha TV, Sanskar TV, Jagran TV, etc. and publication of magazines like Akhand Gyan Magazine, East and West Series Magazine, Rishimukh Magazine, Osho Times, etc. In the present era of increasing stress levels and growing number of nuclear families, people also resort to media to find or redefine the models of behavior in the society. Print media and radio serves effectively in this area. Newspapers have not only included several columns to guide and inspire the young generation but also launched several exclusive newspaper supplements providing directions and guidelines in the area of education, employment, personal growth etc. FM channels on the other hand offer the much required companionship to the youngsters and also run phone in programs to help them resolve their personal issues.

Integration and Social Interaction

Human being is a social animal who cannot survive in isolation. Human beings have a strong desire to stay connected. People often use media for conversation and social interaction, this has become more evident with the viability and ease of accessibility of social media platforms. In a study, the Uses and Gratification Theory was applied to the social-networking sites MySpace and Facebook. The study aimed to understand why people use

social-networking sites, what characteristics are common among targeted users, and what uses and gratifications are met by using those sites. The results found that a majority of people using these platforms used it "to keep in touch with old friends or to keep in touch with current friends, while many others used it to post/look at pictures and locate old friends"(Thuy – Vy Bui, 2014). These new media platforms of communication are even becoming a substitute for real life companionship. The virtual community is becoming the world's biggest community today through which users can create relationships online in a way that could have never been possible through traditional media. There is a huge variety of social networking sites but Facebook is the most visited site globally among youth and adults after google.com as stated by Alexa.com. Facebook gained instant popularity in India as it fulfilled the basic human need of instant connectivity. It has also become a tool that supports status conferral and helps the people to register immediate virtual identity. In a series of studies with undergraduates, Sheldon et al. (2011) demonstrated that Facebook is used to meet the basic human need for relatedness, interpersonal closeness, connection, belonging and acceptance. Many studies also demonstrate that the desire to connect with others in some form or another is what drives Facebook use (Bond – Raacke and Raacke 2010). Feeling socially connected is perhaps the most essential ingredient to the cultivation of happiness.

Entertainment

Entertainment, relaxation and escape from harsh realities of life and monotonous routines have been the most sought after gratifications expected from the media. Most of the mediums today deliver different genres of entertainment based programs. The growing expectation from the media to entertain its audience has brought to the foray a new variety of program termed as infotainment. Information delivered in an entertaining way. According to Katz and Blumer (1973), the most frequently found motives for using traditional media (television, radio and newspapers) are diversion ; the need to escape personal problems and the need to vent out our emotions. These entertainment motives earlier associated with Television are now important gratifications sought from using

Facebook (Sheldon, 2008). The audiences today use entertainment media to experience emotions. They seek reel time experiences that make them laugh or cry or keep them at the edge of emotions. Music has proved itself to be the most viable tool for relaxation. Several researches have also proved that listening to music often calms down the negative emotions and helps to re - energize the mind and soul. Therefore, many people use this medium for relaxation and escapism which is another form of gratification.

Media consumption is a dominant activity in the lives of most people. In keeping with this trend, through the passing decades media has been changing forms and helped individuals to deal with the complexities of their life and achieve happiness.

Conclusion

The Uses and Gratifications Theory is an important communications approach that can be applied to any form of mass communication medium--this includes newspapers, radio, television, and internet. As technology continues to become more available and user generated media continues to grow, this approach can be used effectively to interpret the media consumption habits of the audience. The proliferation of communication technologies is causing vast socio - cultural changes. In this paper we have discussed how Uses and Gratification theory can still be applied to the current mass media scenario as people are using mass media for fulfillment of gratification needs. Media is now becoming a source of instant gratification offering social status, companionship, affection and support in the most desired manner, at the most desired time. This gratification of needs often support and affect life satisfaction in the short run but it still needs to be evaluated whether this form of happiness is sustainable.

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