21st Century Communication: A Reference Handbook

Media Uses and Gratifications

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Chapter 56: Media Uses and Gratifications

From one end of the globe to the other, people in all walks of life use media—in their homes, at their daily labors, and as they move by foot or vehicle from place to place. Every one of these uses involves an audience member making a conscious or unconscious, habitual or new choice among an increasing explosion of media options: traditional choices of radio, TV, and newspapers, magazines, and books and newer options such as Internet sites, video games, DVDs, and MP3 players. In addition, each user is faced with ever-increasing avenues for getting access to their media choices. Users, thus, make "choices" of what to seek and how. In the tradition of media studies known as "uses and gratifications," the fundamental questions have been the following: Why do people make particular media choices? What needs are they filling by doing so? What impacts do their choices have on them? Under what conditions are some choices made and not others?

One person, coming home from a stressful day, may turn to an often-viewed TV drama, not so much for its content but because one of the actors is a familiar favorite, someone welcomed as a "friend." Another may be suspecting that she has some kind of digestive disorder and goes online to find health-oriented Internet sites. Another is becoming increasingly upset about the state of world events and turns to his favorite politically oriented news show for confirmation of his worldview. A crafts fanatic turns to a do-it-yourself TV channel; a lonesome college student seeks refuge in a guilty pleasure, listening to rap music, while none of her usually critical family are home. Accounting for these kinds of audience choices is the essential focus of the uses-and-gratifications approach.

Historical Origins: From Media Effects on Audiences to Audience Effects on Media

A number of intersecting events led scholars both in the social sciences and humanities to become interested in the relationships between media, audiences, and society. One was the rise of the mass media themselves, with the increasing presence in people's lives resulting from the rapid diffusion, in turn, of newspapers, film, radio, and television. With each new technology, media use rose exponentially. A second major impact was World War II—the first war in which mass media were deliberately used on a massive scale to reach and in many cases to persuade citizens. Post-war documentation of the seemingly enormous impacts of media campaigns in Nazi Germany led social scientists in the United States to initiate research programs focused on media effects.

These interests in "audience research" took on a number of forms, each of them interrelated to each other. One interest in audiences resulted directly from becoming aware of the Nazi use of media. On the basis of accounts, it was expected that media could have immense direct "hypodermic"-like effects on audiences, where everyone would be affected the same way. This assumption led some social scientists and policymakers to a concern for the possible negative effects of media and to a host of the now **[p. 507 ↓]** familiar questions on media effects. One common example is how violence portrayals by media affect audiences. A second early interest in audiences was essentially the opposite of a concern for whether media have negative impacts. Rather, the question became "How can media be used to sway audiences to societally approved impacts?" One familiar example is the question of how to use media to persuade citizens to stop smoking.

A third interest in audiences was also driven by a focus on media effects. As soon as media began to proliferate, media institutions needed to account for themselves—to their investors, advertisers, and society. This need led them initially to an interest in audience counts—how many people were using this or that channel or attending to this or that program. Soon, this interest evolved to asking what persons used what media, with initial attentions focused on such questions as whether more educated citizens were more likely to use newspapers or newly immigrated citizens less likely.

Each of these three early interests in audiences dominated media research in the 1940s through the 1960s. Each continues to be a major part of the media studies agenda today. Each is, at root, an interest in media effects on audiences. Yet, despite early anticipations of strong and direct effects, the quest to identify effects has been far more difficult and elusive than expected. It became a byword to suggest that audiences were difficult and expensive to reach, even "obstinate" (Bauer, 1964). "Effects" research moved from the early emphasis on finding direct effects to identifying limited or indirect effects. To discern indirect effects, researchers had to identify other factors that stood between media use and media impact. Increasingly, for example, it was proposed that a host of "selectivity" processes stood between media and its effects, usually summarized as selective attention, perception, and recall. A plethora of alternative theories of what mediates media effects began to be explored, including explorations of how characteristics of spokespersons (e.g., source credibility), messages (e.g., one-sided vs. two-aided presentations), channels (e.g., radio or television), receivers (e.g., audience member age), and contexts of media exposure (e.g., home or car) stood between media use and media effect.

This emphasis on understanding the conditions under which media affect audiences continues today. There is a general consensus that in fact media can affect audiences, sometimes in directly observable ways, but most often indirectly, and sometimes in hidden, concealed ways. The journey from the general acceptance in the 1960s, when at best media were seen as having only limited effects, to the current more complex understandings has been a long one. Various research traditions have pursued different lines of inquiry into these questions, often in relative isolation from each other. Thus, for example, media researchers in the "critical-cultural tradition" (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1972) have focused more on how media negatively affect audiences in concealed ways, while those in the "quantitative empirical" tradition have focused more often on how media may be used to achieve societal-mandated ends such as a citizenry more involved in political life or more attentive to health concerns. Alternatively, "audience reception" (Hall, 1973; Morley, 1992) and "sense-making" (Dervin & Foreman-Wernet, 2003) studies have focused more on how audiences use media to make sense of their lives within the context of sometimes facilitating and sometimes hindering societal conditions. In contrast, uses-and-gratifications researchers have focused more on goal-oriented needs fulfillment.

These different ways of looking at media audiences are often called research traditions. Another name for them is *discourse communities*. This term is useful because it reminds us that research traditions differ not only in how they focus on audiences and their relationships to media but also in their assumptions and vocabularies that become like private languages. The very way these communities talk about media is influenced by and influences how they understand media. This is one reason why many media audience studies seem so contradictory.

Our focus in this chapter is specifically on the uses-and-gratifications tradition, providing a picture of the dominant emphases and accomplishments of that tradition as it began to slowly emerge in the late 1950s and stands today. It is important to note that in the very earliest years of media studies in the 1940s, there was an interest in how people use media to function in their lives, which arose almost simultaneously with the emergence of the emphasis on how media affect people. For example, in work that preceded any of the now formalized attentions to audiences, it was found that audience members were filling needs by listening to radio quiz shows and soap operas, and these provided more than mere diversion or entertainment. For some audience members, media provided education and emotional release as well. Likewise, researchers in these early years found that newspapers were being used not just for information but also as tools for daily living, respite, social prestige, and social contact. This early emphasis on audience motivations was, however, eclipsed by the massive focus on media effects that resulted from widespread public concern for preventing negative and promoting positive media impacts.

Despite marked differences in the various early attentions to media effects, all efforts to study media effects ended up challenged in one way or another by the "obstinate" audience. It came to be generally understood that audience members were using media for specific functions in their lives in ways that seemed to defy researcher attempts to identify media impacts. It was this challenge from recalcitrant audiences that served as an impetus for the turn toward understanding audiences in audience-oriented ways—to understanding why audience members use media and what they use it for.

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Media researchers in various traditions took this turn toward audience-oriented studies of audiences almost simultaneously, although in very different ways. Thus, for example, marketing research began to focus more on audience motivations and lifestyle contexts rather than merely audience counts. Critical-cultural studies, formerly focused primarily on identifying biases and hidden ideologies in media messages, began to have a more intensive focus on how audiences make sense of media messages, attempting to unravel why it is that sometimes audiences passively accept media messages and sometimes they argue and negotiate with them. Using primarily qualitative approaches, this turn became known as *audience reception* analysis. The tradition that became known by the name *uses and gratifications* grew out of and remains anchored today in quantitative social science studies. This tradition was the earliest vigorous and systematic turn to audience-oriented studies of media-audience connection.

The Foundational Assumptions of the Uses-and-Gratifications Approach

The most fundamental conception of media audience uses and gratifications came from Elihu Katz (1959), who penned the term *uses-and-gratifications approach* in 1959. A media research pioneer and one of the many scholars who attempted to find elusive media impacts, in 1959 Katz called for research to no longer focus solely on "what media do to people" but instead to concern itself with "what people do with … media."

The turn toward audiences in this way was in actuality one of the first turns toward looking at media-audience relationship as a communication relationship rather than merely a transmission relationship. The focus in the various approaches to looking at effects assumed that media were transmitting particular meanings in their messages and that audiences were passive recipients of these messages, for good or for bad. In contrast, the uses-and-gratifications turn toward audiences was opening the door to a larger question. Media institutions were no longer seen as the sole source of determining the meanings of media messages. Rather, audiences were proposed as having independent roles. In the media effects paradigm, it was assumed that there was only one way—the producer's way—of making sense of a movie or hearing a song or understanding a story. Furthermore, it was assumed that there was only one way media

could be used—in the way media producers predicted it would be used. In contrast, the foundational assumption of the uses-and-gratifications approach was that audience members have some degree of independent control over what they get out of media and how they use what they get.

While Katz laid down the call for attention to how audiences use media in the late 1950s, the approach known today as the uses-and-gratifications approach did not begin to emerge formally until the 1970s, when McQuail, Blumler, and Brown (1972) began to put people's use of media under their microscopes. It was Blumler and Katz who began to formalize the emergence of the approach in 1974.

Since these earliest formulations and continuing till today, the many researchers working in the uses-and-gratifications tradition have adhered to a central set of core assumptions. These have been discussed in a wide variety of ways but can be summarized as involving five essential propositions: (1) audiences are actively selecting from different media; (2) audience media selection is goal directed; (3) the media and other potential sources compete for audience attention; (4) personal, social, and contextual worlds mediate audience activity; and (5) the uses people make of media and the effects media have on people are interconnected. Each of these assumptions is reviewed below.

Audiences are actively selecting from different media. In the uses-and-gratifications tradition, it is assumed that audience members are active in their selections and uses of different media. The terms used to describe the different media that audiences are selecting can be very confusing because they vary across authors and across time. For example, what is meant by channel in one line of work may be described as technology or medium in another. Across many studies, the possibilities have included channels, mediums, technologies, genres, texts, and content. Channels, mediums, and technologies are often used interchangeably and refer to distinctions such as television, film, radio, newspapers, book, cell phones, the Internet, or sometimes a specific television station, cable network, or magazine. Genre is an often overlapping term but usually refers to classes of selections within a medium, such as soap operas, video games, or television news. Texts usually refer to specific content packages, such as a particular movie, game, or news article.

The body of work known under the label *uses and gratifications* has assumed that audiences actively select their uses of media from the array of possibilities available in society. It is assumed that what drives this media use reflects each person's conscious or unconscious consideration of the usefulness of media to his or her life. Seeing audiences as active in this way has led uses-and-gratifications researchers to have debates with media effects researchers, who have tended to characterize audience members as passive recipients for whatever comes their way. The active audience characterization implies that people are more impervious to influence than media effects theories have allowed. Also, being active in general, people are also assumed to be able to report what media choices they have made and why.

Across the now almost 50 years of uses-and-gratification studies, it is fair to say that the most used "predictor" of audience gratifications has been the particular medium used. Study after study has explored the uses of this medium or that, this genre or that, this particular content or that, and then looked at the extent of and reasons for audience uses.

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There have been studies, for example, of the gratifications obtained from traditional categories such as quiz shows, soap operas, and TV talk shows, and more recently the newer types such as video games, cell phone use, and MP3 player use. Usually, these studies focus on one media type at a time. Thus, for example, one sees many recent studies of audience uses of cell phones.

When multiple media types have been compared, the results show a commonsensical pattern to the findings. As examples, newspapers more often gratify needs for information, whereas TV does so more often for entertainment and pleasure and cell phones for connecting to friends and relatives. In saying this, however, it is important to emphasize that all studies show a great deal of variety in how audience members use specific media. Even for quite specific genre types, for example, quiz shows, the array of gratifications is diverse, indicating that individual audience members use media in different ways.

Audience media selection is goal directed. People are assumed to have specific reasons for selecting the media that they do. The fundamental idea is that audience members turn to media because they expect media to gratify specific needs. For example, a person alone in her apartment may feel the need for companionship and may turn on the television to engage in imagined interaction with characters on some show. While this link between the need and the expectation of a gratification is not considered the only predictor for media use, in the uses-and-gratifications approach, it is considered an important contributor once other factors such as access to media are taken into account. Furthermore, this link between need and expected gratification is central to the basic idea of uses and gratifications. Indeed, this link is the source of the approach's very name.

One of the primary goals in some 50 years of research has been to develop a catalog of possible media gratifications. Two basic approaches have been used. One is to simply ask members of a particular audience their reasons for media use, allowing them to answer in their own words. The second has been to ask audience members to indicate the extent to which a roster of gratifications applied to them and their media engagements. Researchers then developed from these responses, using various content analytic and statistical tools, categories of potential gratifications. With both approaches, the aim has been to develop typologies, or categorical lists, of underlying gratifications.

Because the studies that have pursued the goal of developing lists of possible media gratifications have differed widely in their attentions, no agreed-on list of gratifications has yet been developed that can be applied to all forms and instances of media use. Studies differ in ways almost too numerous to account for—what subgroups of audiences are studied, for what media, in what contexts. For example, a study focusing on children and television produces a somewhat different list of gratifications from one focusing on general-population audience uses of

public television or on teenage users of video games. Furthermore, as new media have proliferated and geographical locations of media use have multiplied, studies attending to these "new" media in "new" locations have added new gratifications to the roster or variations on older ones.

Despite all this often overwhelming diversity in media gratifications, there are some core coherencies. A basic set of four categories of gratifications permeate almost all the lists, albeit under different names and described in different ways. This basic four appeared, for example, in a 1972 study by McQuail, Blumler, and Brown under the labels *diversion*, *personal relationships*, *personal identity*, and *surveillance*. Some 15 years later, in his review of numerous studies, McQuail (1987) produced a summary of gratifications organized into essentially the same four categories but now with slightly different labels—entertainment, integration, and social interaction; personal identity; and information. McQuail also added a roster of illustrative subcategories. This roster of common reasons for media use serves as a useful illustration of the kinds of typologies that have been developed and still are being developed. It is shown in Table 56.1.

Media and other potential sources compete for audience attention. The third essential proposition that is foundational to the uses-and-gratifications approach is that audiences can gratify their needs in a variety of ways using both media and nonmedia sources such as family and friends. These alternative sources are in competition with each other as potential sources of audience need gratifications. This phenomenon is referred to by uses-and-gratifications researchers as the "functional alternatives" proposition (Rosengren & Windahl, 1972). Basically, it says that we exist in a world where there are a number of ways in which our needs for things such companionship and information can be fulfilled. Media are simply a portion of the possible sources we turn to for gratifications.

The proposition that media compete for audience attention has, of course, been a long-term understanding. The idea that audiences have alternative media to turn to in gratifying any particular need has, however, developed much more slowly. There was a time once when with few media available, it was assumed, for example, that audiences turned to television to be entertained and newspapers to be informed. It was assumed that if you knew what kind of media an audience member turned to, you knew what gratification the audience member sought. This simple proposition, however, never offered a satisfactory explanation because even in the early days of media development, different audience members were deriving diverse gratifications from single-medium engagements. Thus, for example, if a group of 100 audience members turned to the latest Harry Potter movie, in a gratifications study, we could easily find at least a few mentions of every possible gratification.

Gratifications as listed in McQuail (1987)	Examples
Entertainment	
Escaping, or being diverted from problems	Working-class man whose work challenges his aging body collapsing at home into escape into sports TV
Relaxing	Teenager turning to the reggae music his father introduced him to in order to relax when school is stressful
Getting intrinsic cultural or aesthetic enjoyment	Besieged parent of twins sensing the joy of being human in a Longfellow poem
Filling time	Patient filling time with a portable electronic game player in doctor's office
Emotional release	Third-grade boy working out aggressions with a video game
Sexual arousal	Young woman feeling sexual stirrings watching romantic movies
Integration and social interaction	
Gaining insight into circumstances of others, gaining social empathy	Voter coming to understand how lack of health insurance is affecting his neighbors
Identifying with others and gaining a sense of belonging	Lonesome teen learning he is not the only one interested in collecting rocks
Finding a basis for conversation and social interaction	Secretary anxious to discuss last night's TV drama with friends at work
Having a substitute for real-life companionship	Isolated mother comforted by feeling she shares in human compassion on a talk show
Helping carry out social roles	Young boy seeing that even world-famous jocks have to apologize sometimes

Enabling onetoconnect with family, friends, society	Grandfather comforted by the e-mailed photos of his grandchildren
Personal identity	
Finding reinforcement for personal values	Mother seeking confirmation that her decision to instruct her daughter about birth control is wise
Finding models of behavior	Mother seeking models for convincing her daughter to practice abstinence until she marries
Identifying with valued others	Teenager gaining a sense of self by hearing a teenage celebrity share his views
Gaining insight into one's self	Employee struggling with boss seeing in a TV drama a possible way to think about his own behavior
Information	
Finding out about relevant events and conditions in immediate surroundings, society, world	Father concerned about his son's draft status seeking information on military actions
Seeking advice on practical matters or opinions and decision choices	Woman just diagnosed with high cholesterol seeking medical advice
Satisfying curiosity and general interest	Newspaper reader doing his habitual morning skimming of latest news
Learning and self-education	Student writing essay required for his English class
Gaining a sense of security through knowledge	Passenger seeking assurance that weather is conducive for flying
SOURCE: As Reported by McQuail (1987, p. 73).	

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[p. 511 ↓] Now, as the traditional boundaries between media-defined functions have become blurred, no direct connection between type of medium and gratification obtained can be assumed. Understanding what predicts how audiences see connections between media and the gratifications they obtain has become even more critical. Uses-and-gratifications researchers now increasingly attempt to determine under what circumstances a specific medium will be chosen for a particular gratification. Recent research has documented that as new media source and content combinations are introduced into media landscape, audiences are actively comparing new ways of satisfying needs with old ones, sometimes retaining past choices, sometimes choosing new ones, and sometimes adding new ones to a personal set of media gratification options.

Personal, social, and contextual worlds mediate audience activity. This fourth foundational proposition grows out of the preceding one. Since the link between media choices and how audiences see those choices as filling needs has been shown to not be directly predicted by media type, uses-and-gratifications researchers have turned to identifying what mediates these relationships—what stands between media choices and how audience members are gratified by media use. The major thrust in this quest has been to predict audience reasons for media use. This has led to the development of a catalog of various predictors for the origins of needs. Three major classes of predictors of audience needs have been identified: (1) demographic, (2) psychological, and (3) environmental/contextual variables.

The most common set of variables offered as predicting the origin of needs has been the demographic characteristics of media audiences and users. Such variables have sometimes been referred to as the "social circumstances" of media users because demographics reflect the social categories and roles society uses to categorize people. Demographic variables commonly include measures such as age, level of education, gender, and ethnicity.

Personality or other psychological characteristics have been the second major group of predictors of audience needs. Using psychological motives for predicting communication behavior was given its first extensive consideration by McGuire (1974). Since that time, a variety of psychological variables have been tested as possible explanations for gratifications sought and obtained. Some have been derived from what

is commonly called the "big five" personality model, which categorizes people based on five dimensions: (1) extroversion, (2) neuroticism, (3) openness to experience, (4) agreeableness, and (5) conscientiousness. Others have focused on qualities such as loneliness or a need for sensation seeking and arousal. Still others have gone further to suggest that these psychological differences are rooted in genetic makeups that then affect human temperaments, including traits such as activity level, adaptability, and attention span.

The third major group of predictors of the origins of audience needs has been factors external to media users—contextual and environmental factors. The reasoning here

has been that the life conditions audience members find themselves in may produce tensions, create problem awareness, frustrate real-life satisfactions, reinforce particular media-related values, or provide a field of expectations about media use (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974). A woman who just broke up with her significant other may decide to watch a movie for solace, whereas another may watch the very same movie to learn how to cope with a cheating spouse. These external factors may interact with audience personality and other traits, creating a complex picture of media use.

Researchers have in fact demonstrated the interconnect-edness of these predictors and how they relate to audience needs and gratifications through media use. As this work has advanced over the years, audience needs have been increasingly defined as both innate to and descriptive of the individual and at the same time relating to the individual's place in society and the constraints and freedoms associated with that societal location.

The uses people make of media and the effects media have on people are interconnected. Throughout the years, ongoing attempts have been made to link media gratifications research with media effects research. It has been argued that audience members who turn more to particular media to meet their gratification needs—whether these choices be conscious or unconscious—will be more likely to be affected (either negatively or positively) by the content and characteristics of that media. Such impacts have been hypothesized for a host of potential audiences—for example, young children who rely more heavily on media for information because of their relative lack of life experience and background information and get a distorted view of politics, teenage

girls who rely heavily on teen magazines as their sources of models for being female and become obsessed with weight issues, isolated older adults who turn to television for feelings of being social but end up seeing the world as more fearful and threatening.

In this sense, it can be seen that the media uses-and-gratifications tradition, although actively pursuing an agenda of understanding audiences in audience-oriented ways, still straddles between effects-oriented and audience-oriented approaches, struggling with how to simultaneously see audience members as unique individuals and as anchored in societal conditions and highly constrained by media choices society offers them.

Underlying Mechanisms: Theories of the Media Use/Media Gratification Connection

A great many studies such as those described above have been done focusing on predicting audience member needs and gratifications. Because of differences in how researchers measure the many variables involved and, in particular, what media they focus on and how they categorize **[p. 512 ↓]** gratifications, it is not easy to extract consistent patterns across studies. Many of the patterns that have emerged do, however, meet commonsensical expectations. Thus, for example, a large number of studies have shown that in general, younger adults have been more likely to name personal identity and entertainment as media gratifications, whereas higher educated adults have been more likely to name information and women more likely to name integration and social interaction. Likewise, studies have shown that audiences using newspapers report more information gratifications, those using radio more diversion gratifications, and those using television more diversion and companionship gratifications. Most important, however, although differences have often been statistically significant, research has increasingly shown that predicting user needs and gratifications is not the same thing as understanding how users make connections between different kinds of media and how they use them.

As a result, the more sophisticated turn in this work has begun to dig much deeper, focusing in particular on mechanisms or theories of what it is that explains the connections audience members make between their media use choices and the

gratifications they obtain from media use. Several consistent guiding propositions have emerged from this work, which we summarize below as four sets of explanations focusing on understanding the underlying mechanisms. None of these is considered the single explanation of audience media uses and gratifications, but taken together, they provide a developing complex set of understandings of what is involved in the media use/media gratifications connection. In addition, they have begun to provide empirical support for the basic assumptions on which the uses-and-gratifications tradition rests.

The first set of explanations has focused on understanding audience members' activities as ongoing processes. Thus, for example, Levy and Windahl (1984, 1985) were the first to propose that audience activities can change during single engagements with media. They were also the first to empirically study differences before, during, and after media engagement. This work has provided support for the idea that audience members are actively engaged in ongoing self-monitoring of their media use activities as these are embedded in time. On the surface, this may seem a commonsensical idea. But, given that uses and gratifications as a tradition emerged from a media effects paradigm, which expected constant and unchanging effects to operate directly from media to audiences, beginning to understanding how audience activities change during single-medium engagements constituted an important breakthrough.

The second set of explanations is also related to the understanding that audience members are self-monitoring and that their evaluations of media use change as a result of this self-monitoring. In a thrust of work known under the label *expectancy value theory*, researchers—in particular Palmgreen and Rayburn (1982, 1985)—drew on theories focusing on attitude change in psychology to propose that audience member activity is a result of a person's belief in the probability of success (expectancy) for that behavior and the evaluation of potential consequences should that behavior succeed or fail.

Media users' expectations for their needs to be gratified have been a part of the uses-and-gratifications approach since its inception, of course. Nevertheless, this theory formalized the attention. A major focus in this work has been accounting for differences between gratifications sought and those obtained. For example, a user turns to the *Lord of the Rings* DVD set because she loves the books but on trying to view the movies finds them too violent. As a result, the gratification she sought is not sufficiently

obtained. Failing to be gratified, her expectations for future similar media uses may be altered. This kind of theorizing has opened up deeper inquiries into how expectancies and evaluations of media use are formed.

The third set of attentions to underlying mechanisms also builds on the idea of media audiences as self-regulating. This development has begun to examine media as sources of affective regulation and mood management. Developed in part in response to criticisms that the uses-and-gratifications approach has placed too much emphasis on audiences as rational decision makers who weigh how best to gratify needs, this theory has proposed that media use is at least in part a function of audience members' needs for emotional regulation (Zillmann, 1988).

The idea is that media users select their media choices to minimize bad moods and maximize good moods. The choices may be conscious or unconscious and, indeed, may have started off as an accidental media engagement that over time became imprinted in user memories driving future media choices. Thus, an audience member may stumble across a comedy that makes him or her feel good, and the next time he or she feels blue, he or she may choose to watch that comedy again to achieve the same happy results. To some extent, it can be said that this theory has simply added another category of gratifications to those offered in Table 56.1, but some researchers are now pursuing it as a fundamental explanation of media use in its own right.

Although the underlying mechanisms described above may be considered as psychological in emphasis, the fourth is more sociological. As described in the section on predictors, some researchers have created integrative models whose aim has been to show how characteristics of individuals work in tandem with characteristics of societal conditions to predict media uses and gratifications. The intent has been to show that needs arise not only from biological and psychological traits but also from the connections people have with society and culture, including media economic structures and technology and social and situational circumstances.

The uses and dependency theory offered by Rubin and Windahl (1986) is an example of a theory focusing on how **[p. 513 ↓]** media industries and society may affect audiences' choices. Society, they reasoned, can affect how accessible media are to audiences and how audiences perceive their needs and expectations for media,

whereas media industries control the type of content available for audiences. For example, a given audience member may have a high need for information that compares liberal and conservative views but lack the money to purchase periodicals that are more likely to present such coverage. The audience member has become dependent on weekly Web surfing visits to political magazine sites. In this way, this theory has argued that these converging factors result in the user becoming dependent on some aspect of media to gratify particular needs. The theory has provided for understanding how individual and societal factors combine and has opened up additional avenues for complex analyses of media engagements.

The Big Unanswered Questions

When one reads the academic literature, one finds a confusing and contradictory set of criticisms within the community of uses-and-gratifications researchers and between this community and other discourse communities pursuing related issues. We provide here a general overview not of the specific criticisms about this kind of scholarship or that kind of method but rather of the big unanswered questions that researchers are continuing to debate. These same big unanswered questions are the source of ever-present debates among those using the uses-and-gratifications approach as well as among those in the critical/cultural, audience reception, and sense-making traditions of studying the society-media-audience relationship. In can be said, in fact, that these are the same big questions that dominate all media studies. We present them here without any attempt to review the plethora of arguments in the literature about each. Rather, we offer them to the reader as fodder for thinking.

How do we explain both external forces acting on audiences and internally motivated audience activities? This is, by far, the biggest and most central unanswered question. Among the many subquestions that are the focus of animated arguments are issues such as the following: If audiences are seen as the commodities they see to advertisers, can we even say that audience members have the freedom to actively select what media they use? How do we explain audience members' active and conscious choices of programs society would deem to be negative, such as pornography, while still respecting audiences' freedoms to choose? How do we explain when audiences' media choices reflect or defy larger social or cultural expectations when, for example,

a member of a cultural subgroup does not reflect the dominant media uses and gratifications of his or her group?

It is at the juncture of these questions that we find young researchers in the various research traditions beginning to move toward each other in an attempt to explain the conjoint interactions of societal and individual forces on audience choices and uses. The overarching term for this issue is *the structure versus agency debate*—the question of when and under what conditions audience behavior is explained by societal forces or as a result of audience activity independent of these forces.

If there is any consensus emerging from the debates, it is that efforts must not explain what happens as "structure versus agency" but as "structure and agency." The idea is that a media user's behavior must be addressed with multiple converging explanations focusing on both social forces and individual freedoms and coming to understand when society dominates, when the individual dominates, and when both work conjointly, whether it be in struggle or convergence.

If we look at the media life of a single user, we can illustrate this. Mary, a 20-year-old college senior, prides herself on being an independent woman, somewhat a feminist. Her dad encouraged that as well, and she loves TV shows such as *The Closer*, with strong, sassy women. Yet Mary also has a "secret" TV-viewing life. When she comes home exhausted by the strains of classes and paid work, she admits she has a "guilty pleasure." She watches hiphop MTV, with all the scenes of men brutalizing women. She says she doesn't understand why, but she is addicted. On the other hand, when Mary drives her car, she purpo-sively chooses to listen to NPR but then hardly listens at all. She describes it as having "1/100th of my ear" listening while thinking of other things. Mary also admits that she is a far too loyal member of the American consumerist society. "I am constantly buying things I do not need." Mary acknowledges to herself that society may look down on her decision to watch MTV while applauding her choice to tune into NPR, but her preference for either medium does not reflect these social expectations. Mary's media use is complicated, as qualitative studies are beginning to show most media use is.

What is active or passive? Conscious or unconscious? Ritualistic or purposive? Habitual or goal directed? Collective or individual? Each of these pluralities pervades the various

criticisms and countercriticisms levied between and within discourse communities. A host of very specific methods-oriented debates ensue. As one example, cultural studies researchers charge that uses-and-gratifications researchers assume that audience activity is conscious, purposive, active, individualistic, and goal directed and that audience members can articulate what they use media for. To counter these claims, cultural studies researchers ask these questions: What of unconscious needs—such as a youngster unconsciously feeling comforted by a particular show because the lead actor looks like his or her deceased father? What of **[p. 514 ↓]** socially ritualistic media use, where friends play video games while simultaneously listening to hip-hop? Are these uses purposive? In what way? What of inarticulate users, not used to reflection and explanation? These pluralities form the fodder for not only debates but also future research directions.

Figure 56.1 Three Ways of Looking at Media-Audience Connection
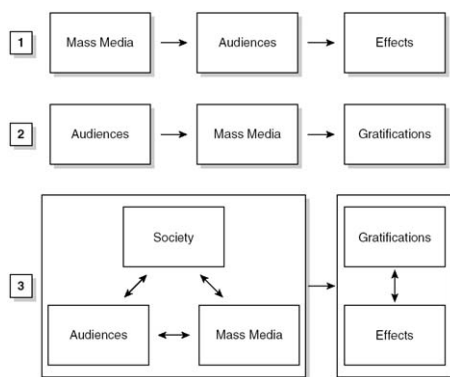
What is the difference between a media effect and a media gratification? In one sense, this unanswered question rests on layers of subtle differences in complicated academic assumptions and vocabularies. But in another it is a fundamental question. On the one hand, the effects paradigm assumes that media are acting on people. On the other, the uses-and-gratifications approach assumes that people are acting on media. But some researchers counter this by suggesting that if media make offerings available that users use in particular ways, that in itself is an effect. When audience members choose to use particular media, expecting specific gratifications, aren't they predicting how media will affect them?

Conclusion

The tradition of media studies known as *uses-and-gratifications research* does not offer a grand or coherent theory of media use. Rather, it is best seen as a set of complementary and sometimes competing understandings of the connections between media uses and media gratifications. It is primarily psychological in orientation. In essence, it is an attempt to develop understandings of the psychological functions to which audiences put their uses of media.

In quantitative social sciences, mass media studies have consisted of two empirical emphases. Media effects researchers have focused on what impact media can have on people. The goal of that approach has been to prevent negative effects from harming people, promote positive effects that can help people, and provide media producers with the means by which to do either. In contrast, uses-and-gratifications researchers have sought to examine the reasons people have for using media they do. The differences between these two approaches are illustrated as rows 1 and 2 in Figure 56.1 media. Row 3 provides a far more complex picture where somehow media, audiences, and society interact to yield media effects and/or media gratifications. This is a fair representation of the current state of attentions not only in uses-and-gratifications research but in all media studies focusing on the media-audience connection. In one sense, the complexity of row 3 may be seen as a step backward, as if somehow in 50 years there has been no resolution of the questions focusing on how media affect people versus how people affect media. But the important change is that the question has begun to focus more on multiple converging forces that acknowledge the power of society, media, and audience members. The uses-and-gratifications approach will continue to be one evolving avenue for exploring these complex relationships.

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