

Selected Theory: Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

**Title: Reframing Media Habits: The Enduring Relevance of Uses and Gratifications
Theory in a Digital Age**

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Abstract

This paper examines the continued validity of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) in an ever-changing digital media environment. UGT was originally designed to explain active media consumption and it is still an important theoretical concept to utilise in understanding how individuals interact with social media, streaming platforms and mobile technologies. This paper shows how UGT has successfully adapted to new ways of using media through key studies, such as social connection, entertainment, identity expression, and information seeking. UGT's core principle is also sincere critiques and still meaningful to the user centered media behavior in the age of the digital.

Keywords

Media consumption, Uses and Gratifications Theory, digital media, social media, audience behavior, media effects.

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1. Introduction

In the past decades the media landscape changed dramatically. In the modern day, mobile devices, social media platforms and streaming platforms have contributed to digital mobile and interactive media. It produces itself differently today actively with individuals disclosing, highlighting, and sharing media experiences rather than simply consuming them (Boudkouss et al., 2021). It is moving from pushing to pulling, from one way to two-way communication, from communication to interaction, from one place to multiple devices and contexts, from one platform to many platforms (Wei et al., 2024).

It is natural to begin wondering about the continued usability of traditional media theories with so many changes concerning media technologies. The digital environment has rendered models of the past, namely models in which audiences were seen to be passive recipients such as the Hypodermic Needle Theory and what is known as agenda setting appear outdated (Xu et al., 2025). The Uses and Gratifications Theory was born in the mid twentieth century continues to be significantly relevant.

UGT provides a useful framework to understand the process and the reasons for individuals' intensive pursuit of some media to fulfill their diverse psychological and social needs (Szeto et al., 2021). UGT provides an orientation with a focus on these motivations using the motivations behind media use and considering that modern media use involves active, goal-directed behaviors that characterize the use of media (Kaur et al., 2020). In this sense, it offers itself particularly well to the analysis of the very recent practices of interaction with social media platforms, streaming services and digital news media.

This is the first part of the paper providing an exploration of historical origins of UGT and foundational concepts. It looks at the various types of media gratifications that are key and how they have changed in the digital age. After this a literature review is conducted and recently conducted empirical studies presenting UGT applied to social media, streaming platforms and digital news consumption are highlighted. In the discussion section, the faults and strengths of UGT are discussed, especially in relation to algorithm-based content and user generated media. The conclusion reflects on the enduring importance of UGT and outlines possible ways for future research.

2. Origin of the Theory

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is a method of explaining the relationship between the media and the audience using the mid 20th century theory in response to existing media effects models, which mentioned the audiences as passive receivers of messages from the media (Yu, 2024). The hypodermic needle or magic bullet theories of early media are theories of direct, uniform effect of media content on a largely helpless audience. UGT emphasized the active participation of the audience in the decisions he made regarding and interpreted media content according to his own individual needs (Kaur et al., 2020).

In the 1940s Herta Herzog and other researchers laid the groundwork for UGT. In her 1944 study of radio soap opera appeal to housewives, Herzog found the gratifications programs offered them escape from reality, wishful thinking, advice. Herzog's work also recognized that, when viewing media, audiences consciously chose, and did so out of psychological and social needs (Wang et al., 2021). It was a totally different theory of media, compared to theories of media that were dominant in the period, that were more concerned with the media than with the audience agency.

This idea was developed additional studies carried out in the 1950s and 1960s. In fact, UGT was not formally and systematized until the 1970's, and this was largely in the works of Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler and Michael Gurevitch. In 1974, they outlined the basic assumptions of the theory, such as the audience being active participants in the communication process (not simply passive units), the goals in which media is used are goal directed, and media fulfilling needs psychological and social (Ringo, 2025). Different individuals could use the same media content to get different gratifications from it and these researchers stressed that the same media content could be used to gratify different individuals.

The reason this theoretical development had occurred was because of the rise of mass media, including radio, television, and newspapers. They provided a growing set of content offered for selective selection by individuals. Radio was very popular such that, people would turn to tune in on radio for music or news or any drama that they want to listen to, according to their tastes or situations (Sheldon et al., 2021). Similarly, early television programs provided largely entertainment, information and escapism, each providing different needs of different viewers.

3. Core Concepts of UGT

The main focus of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is rooted in a set of primary belief on which it differs from earlier media theories. For UGT, the audience is central in being active and the important one in the consumption process of the media. Media content is perceived as the action of individuals who are decision makers and who select media channels and content consciously to fulfil their identified needs and wants (Rrustemi et al., 2021). From media studies, UGT provides a more audience focused approach to the usage of media thus giving an audience focus to the media studies.

UGT's categorization of forms of gratifications sought by audiences from media is one of its most important contributions. Broadly these can be classified in five categories:

Cognitive Gratifications: This is when the media is used to get information and knowledge. For example, supporters read the news or watch news, turn to documentaries or educational programs for information, or listen to online content to seek clarifications, receive general information, studying specific issues (Bowden-Green et al., 2021).

Affective Gratifications: Media is also consumed or gratified for Affective Reasons non utilitarian, emotional, or aesthetic experiences (Camilleri et al., 2021). For people, you may see films, hear music or simply do the inspirational content for different purposes such as the pleasure, the emotional release or just to indulge in the artistic value of the media products.

Personal Integrative Gratifications: Self-concept reinforcing, personal opinion forming, and promoting one's confidence are all included (Limperos et al., 2024). For instance, being associated with particular sets of ideologies or fitting in with role models presented in media may increase one's sense of self.

Social Integrative Gratifications: People turn to media to foster social relationships as well as to maintain those already established relationships. The media is a convenient tool to start the conversation, to share the experience or even to build the sense of community among us (Lou et al., 2021). For example, the social media platforms are used to interact with friends, join group discussion or express common interests.

Tension Release Gratifications: Media also provides a vehicle for release of tension. Entertainment content includes games, comedies, or fantasy films for people to relax and relieve stress or break up from their daily routine or pressure (Wei et al., 2024).

At the heart of UGT is drawing attention to the liberties of the individual to employ media resources according to his or her own needs and settings. The theory asserts that the audience is just as self-aware and make conscious choices as to watch engagements as media is not the causal force behind audience behaviour (Menon, 2022). Its relevance in contemporary media circumstances, where content is bounteous and users impose the extent of access, makes UGT even significant.

Two other extension concepts of UGT are media displacement and media complementarity. Media displacement is when the old form of media is replaced with the new form. For instance, streaming platforms have accounted for the rise of many to leave traditional television viewing (Pourazad et al., 2023). Conversely, media complementarity argues that new media does not necessarily replace the previous media but instead coexist and strengthen each other (Sahu et al., 2021). For example, watching a news story on TV, and checking further online, using both to satisfy thirst for information.

These core concepts illustrate the extensiveness and complexity of UGT as an explanation about why and how people interact with media. The uniqueness of the UGT lies in its ability to see that people can get different gratifications from the same content and that this will influence their way of approaching media (Pourazad et al., 2023). Although this has been supplanted from its position as a working foundation in media research, owing particularly so in instances of a large repertoire of media options coupled with the emerging prominence of the user, it remains a foundational framework.

4. Literature Review

This section synthesizes the findings of peer reviewed studies to show that UGT continues to shed light onto motivations of users, the affordances of a platform, and media habits.

4.1 Social Media Platforms

New dimensions of media use appeared due to the popularity of platforms such as Instagram, TikTok and Twitter. According to Pourazad, Stocchi, and Narsey (2023), audience engagement and gratification differ considerably from one platform to the other. To give an example, the affective and social integrative gratifications in relation to the Instagram and TikTok were found in that users were entertained aesthetically to seek a feeling of belonging through influencer's content. In contrast, Twitter/X was used more frequently for cognitive gratifications

(e.g., to stay informed or in the context of public discourse). The behaviors of these platform specific kinds are surfaced as user's tend to selectively engage, depending on what kind of gratifications can each of the platforms best provide them.

Szeto et al. (2021) also looked into how dermatologists utilize social media to share information and communicate with their audience. The study applied UGT, and found that content related to dermatology was cognitive integrative and personal integrative. For instance, users of this site wanted to learn how to take care of their skin and amuse their self-concept and health identity by following medical professionals. It focused on the importance of interactivity and credibility regarding the user engagement, as those digital platforms are based on visual content, especially on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube.

The social media ecosystem is gratified by both studies and their findings indicate that personalization, entertainment and identity building are those gratifications. Furthermore, in addition to that, users are not passive consumers but are actively choosing platforms that coincide with their psychological and social needs.

4.2 Streaming Services

UGT has also been used to explore media consumption during video streaming on over the top (OTT) services such as Netflix and YouTube. In Menon (2022), OTT users' intention to subscribe and continuing OTT usage was explained with respect to how gratifications affect user behavior. Five major gratifications were identified by the study information seeking, entertainment, escapism, social interaction and habit. These platforms were not just viewed by their users to watch content, they engaged with these platforms to unwind, participate in online discussions, and streaming into a daily course of action.

According to Sahu, Gaur and Singh (2021), they compared user indulgence in OTT platforms with conventional television platform with the help of niche theory and UGT. On demand, personalization and entertainment are considered as gratifications of OTT platforms, which was supported by their research results. Being able to curate experience was very powerful, especially in an era of content super abundance viewers loved it.

The common thread in the two studies lies in the media complementarity, which does not necessarily mean that OTT services would step in and displace the traditional TV, since they provide different needs at a better rate. On top of that it supports the concept of technological

affordances that help to adjust the user's choice of content by means of playback control and algorithmic recommendations.

4.3 News Consumption in Digital Spaces

One of the biggest roles UGT has played was to analyze how people consume news in the digital age and how they're consuming it in a way that's nontraditional. Considering Lou et al. (2021), they looked into news consumption on Telegram and found that the reasons for the use of the platform were mainly convenience, speed and anonymity. For users, Telegram offered easy access to uncensored news and group discussions and thus fulfilled users' cognitive and social integrative needs afforded by Telegram. The study showed that people used Telegram both to bring themselves up to date and to share news, put forward political views, and cultivate a sense of community with users sharing the same political views.

In their work, Wei, Nawi and Naeem (2024) used UGT to understand how people share fake news on social media. Behind sharing fake news, they found that entertainment, social bonding and self enhancement are the main motivations. Such challenges the traditional assumptions that only lack of awareness leads to dissemination of misinformation. It instead shows that such behaviors result from gratification seeking, especially through identity performance and community engagement. The study builds on the notion that media use goes hand in hand with high levels of psychological need, including the need for satisfaction of social validation and entertainment.

5. Analysis of Findings

All of these studies have a few recurring themes:

- **Personalization:** Whether on Netflix or Instagram, users seek content tailored to their tastes, reinforcing the importance of individual agency in media selection.
- **Interactivity:** Social media platforms and news apps emphasize two-way communication, allowing users to engage, comment, and co-create content fulfilling both social and personal gratifications.
- **Identity Building:** Whether through health-related posts, fake news sharing, or influencer engagement, users actively shape their self-image and social roles through media.
- **Entertainment and Escapism:** This remains a dominant motivation across all platforms, confirming UGT's original insight into the importance of emotional and affective needs.

6. Discussion

In the era of the Digital, the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) shows a remarkable flexibility and the Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) has proven to be extremely useful with user generated content, social media platforms and on demand streaming services (Boudkouss et al., 2021). Long considered one of UGT's central tenets, that users are actively selecting media based on their needs and that media is very much in service to these needs, remains relevant (Wei et al., 2024). Algorithmic feeds, influencer driven content and switching platforms are a real fertile ground for the application and for the reinterpretation of UGT.

UGT is one of the main strengths in explaining how people use multi-platform media and how they switch between platforms. In a world where someone might be plagued with messaging on WhatsApp, scrolling TikTok, and binging on Netflix in the same hour, you really need to understand where someone's motivational shift is taking place in each hour (Kaur et al., 2020). These patterns can be understood through UGT, that people are observable towards the most efficient or fun gratification at any instance of time. For instance, they might look to TikTok when they want a quick form of entertainment (or tension release), Instagram for how they present themselves (or personal integrative needs), and on YouTube to learn how to do something (or cognitive needs) (Bowden-Green et al., 2021).

UGT has been persistently lambasted. However, a major criticism of it is its individualistic orientation which pays little attention to broader structural and the sociocultural forces that prevail as context in the influence of media behavior. UGT can focus on personal choice and motivation to the exclusion of such factors as class, race, culture or digital literacy in determining access to and interpretation of the media (Camilleri et al., 2021). Furthermore, the theory is unable to explain well beyond systemic constraints such as algorithmic curation, commercial interest or the rule by some platforms that can shape user experience and choice in a subtle yet powerful way.

The second critique is that UGT doesn't have much predictive power. The theory is good to explain why people use media but fails to predict media behavior or outcomes. In most cases, this exercise is retrospective, based on users' own reports about what motivated them, which can be subjective or inconsistent (Limperos et al., 2024). The methodological problem with this method of data collection stems from the fact that people report things as they think others might want to hear.

UGT has evolved to respond to these critiques. More recent studies on gratifications present newer categories of gratifications in particular in digital contexts: social validation, algorithmic personalization, self-branding and community affiliation. The addition of these reflects the transition of focus from passive consumption to fact of performance, participatory media use in the digital environment (Menon, 2022). TikTok and Instagram are also not only a place to consume content, but read it are also placing to define identity, or compare identity, and engage with a community.

Algorithmic media has nuanced us on how we have thought about gratification. In many cases algorithms positively construct what the user envisions, so to speak, even before the user has an opportunity to express a preference. Nevertheless, UGT's long tradition regarding conscious, goal-oriented media use needs to be rethought now that we are in the algorithmic age (Sahu et al., 2021). Despite still making choices, users' choices are being crept up on by invisible systems that guide them to make decisions, curate them, or constrain them.

Researches in the influencer culture put forward these findings of how audiences look for social relationships and lifestyle advices from content creators. It is from gratification drawn from engagement with the creator (reaction, duet, comment), co creation, and community validation and from the content itself (Pourazad et al., 2023). This is in concordance with their social integrative and personal integrative needs as outlined by UGT.

7. Conclusion

The Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT) that emerged in the mid 1950s is a radical departure from the passive audience models that preceded the emergence of the Theory and radically changed the way scholars think about media audience. UGT also made the point of how people actively select media to meet specific psychological and social needs and needs like information seeking and entertainment, social connection and self-expression. In the digital era where user's consumption of a multitude of platforms is broad, from streaming service, social media to news app as well as feeds curated from algorithm, it has only become more relevant.

However, the theory has been criticised on fair grounds: the theory focuses on the individual agency, not the structural effects, the methodology involves self-reporting. Nonetheless, UGT remains a source of valuable insights in user behavior. As with any other platform specific to the distribution of and interaction with UGC, UGT is a flexible and adaptable framework,

especially when applied to platform switching, user generated content, influencer engagement and personalized algorithms.

With looking forward, and interdisciplinary and cross platform studies, UGT will be able to further strengthen itself to suit the swiftly changing digital media landscape. UGT is then not merely a historical theory, but a dynamic tool for thinking about and understanding how and why people of today consume all media in a world of profound and multiplying connections.

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