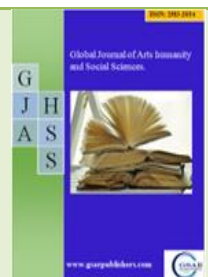


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## CONTEMPORARY MASS MEDIA PARADIGM: ANALYSING MASS MEDIA EFFECTS IN MASS MEDIA AUDIENCE PERSPECTIVE

By

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### Abstract

The study draws firstly on theories that question the assertion that mass media is all-powerful; portraying the media as having direct, instant, and significant impacts on audiences who are perceived as relatively powerless and receptive. This viewpoint is often referred to as the "magic bullet," "stimulus-response," or "hypodermic needle" model of media effects. The Magic Bullet Theory, a key communication model developed in the early 20th century, suggested that media messages directly influenced audience behaviour and attitudes, much like "magic bullets." Although this theory was once widely accepted, modern research has cast doubt on its validity. The Magic Bullet Theory fails to consider the Uses and Gratifications Theory, introduced later, which suggests that media audience are not passive but active in the communication process. This study reconsidered the paradigm shift emphasizing the audience's role in the communication process to understand how they choose, interpret, and find satisfaction in media content which is summarized as limited media effect model. While mass media does have a considerable impact on society, it's crucial to acknowledge that a range of factors shape individuals' beliefs and behaviours. These factors include personal environments, needs, desires, preconceived societal norms, and perceptions of the media. These elements collectively shape how individuals interact with mass media and get the satisfaction for the consumption of media cues. The study concluded that with the proliferation of multimedia structures in the contemporary mass media landscape, audiences now have the opportunity to choose among numerous media channels and content options.

### Introduction

The contemporary mass media landscape calls for the need to re-investigate the role of mass media audience in mass communication system so as the fully understand the role of media audience play in selecting and interpreting the gratifications derived from mass media contents. Following the widespread argument and disagreement over communication paradigms which for decades studied what the mass media do to people, ascertaining that the people were a mass of passive and gullible consumers of communication cues that come their way and the belief that the mass media are all-powerful, the limited effects model emerged as a more acceptable explanation of communication effects, influences and behaviours. As a sharp departure from the past

assertion, one of the new models that emerged under the limited effects school of thought is uses and gratifications theory which presented the media audience as active and discerning media consumers who select mass media platforms and content that best gratifies their hunger and thirst for information, entertainment and other mass media utilities. According to Olannye-Onkonofua and Oji (2022), people require communication to meet their needs, which are based on social and psychological moods and conditions. Gerlich, Drumheller, Babb, and De'Armond, (2015) posit that mass media scholars changed the direction of research from traditional approaches evaluating "What media does to people?" to assessing "what people do with media?" As Chiang, (2013) put it, Uses and Gratifications Theory is rooted in traditional mass communication



research on how a specific media is sought and selected in order to satisfy the information needs of the audience.

Windahl, Signitzer, and Olson, (2008), state that most important role of the media is to fulfil the needs and motivations of the media content consumers. Therefore, the more these needs are met, the more satisfaction they get. This paper explores the paradigm shift from conventional views of mass media effects to the emergence of limited effect model of mass communication.

### Basic Assumptions of Magic Bullet Theory

According to McQuail (2005), the key assumptions of the Magic Bullet Theory are as follows:

- i. Human reactions to stimuli are consistent and predictable.
- ii. Media messages are directly injected into the collective consciousness of the public, similar to a syringe injecting fluid.
- iii. Messages are deliberately crafted to provoke specific reactions.
- iv. The effects of media messages are immediate and powerful, capable of causing significant behavioural changes in individuals.
- v. The public is unable to resist or escape the influence of the media.
- vi. These assumptions have inspired research that has led to alternative perspectives and theories, challenging the idea of the media's all-encompassing influence as suggested by the Magic Bullet Theory.

### Understanding Uses and Gratifications Theory

The uses and gratifications theory is a mass communication theory that tries to understand how people actively seek to go after certain forms of media and media content to satisfy specific needs. According to Ijeh and Iburho (2013), Uses and Gratifications draws researchers' attention to the fact that people decide to use certain mass media and consume certain median contents based on their convictions that such media and the contents can serve certain needs. Uses and gratification theory suggests that the choices that people make in selecting media and the contents are based on the gratifications that they get from the consumption of media contents. People have different goals they want to satisfy and the media always has a solution for them (Oji, 2011b). The theory challenges the notion of a passive media audience; by emphasizing that mass media audience as active members of the communication process, who actively choose, interpret and utilize media contents for their gratifications. Elihu Katz first introduced the uses and gratifications theory when he came up with the notion that people use the media to their benefits. The audience is active in this situation, as opposed to the Magic Bullet idea, which claims that the audience is passive. The user/audience is at the heart of this communication philosophy (Olanye-Okonofua, and Oji, 2022).

According to Asemah, Nwammuo and Nkwam-Uwaoma (2017), the theory is contemporary because it contradicted the older perception that assumed the audience was a passive group. The

uses and gratifications theory views the audience as active, which means that they actively seek out specific media and contents to achieve certain gratifications that satisfy their personal needs. From the foregoing, it can be stated that the power of the mass media as agents of direct social and political influence is quite limited. The mass media audience are not passive but active in selecting and interpreting media content to their benefits.

The uses and gratifications theory directs attention to crucial issues: One is the ideas that media messages are potentially open to different interpretations by members of the mass media audience. The second issue is that different members of the media audience may use and interpret any particular media content in different ways from how the sender intended it, and in quite different way from other members of the audience (Hagen and Wasko, 2000). This means that uses and gratifications theory challenged the view of a passive audience which responds in a fixed and prescribed way to mass media messages. The first set of studies that ushered in the uses and gratifications theory was on the consumption of different radio programmes like soap opera and quizzes. According to McQuail (1998), the model started as a fairly simple and straightforward attempt to learn more the basis of appeal of popular radio programmes and about the connection between the attractions of certain kind of media contents and other features of personality and social circumstances. The author elaborated thus:

A simple wish to know more about the audience, an awareness of the importance of individual differences in accounting for the audience experience, a still fresh wonderment at the power of popular media to hold and involve their audience; and attachment to the case study as an appropriate tool and aid to psychological modes of explanation (McQuail, 1998:151).

The contemporary mass media landscape involves a double focus on investigating mass media effects and understanding the audience perspective. Therefore, it is imperative for researchers to explore how media influence members of the audience, while also considering how the audience select, interpret, respond and the utility they derive from the consumption of mass media messages. This dynamic interaction shapes the interesting evolution of mass media impact to both the medium and audience.

### Understanding the Concept of Mass Media Audience

Over the years, the construct of mass media audience and its proper understanding in communication process has been a major preoccupation among mass media scholars and researchers in the field of communication studies. The concept of mass communication entails the transmission of messages to large and heterogeneous audience who are consumers of mass media messages. The audience is one of the central elements of media studies. In conceptualising the audience in this discourse, the audience are known to be receivers and consumers of media messages. Wimmer and Dominick (2010) point out that uses and gratifications theory takes the view of a media consumer by examining how people use the media and the gratifications they seek and derive from their media consumption. Instead of the

question, what type of effect occurs and under what condition? Uses and gratifications theory asks the question, who uses which content from the media and under what condition and for what reason? (Asemah, Nwammuo and Nkwam-Uwaoma, 2017). The question that uses and gratifications is trying to address is why the audience choose certain media contents and ignore others. Oji and Ubini (2021) state that the Uses and gratifications theory actually concedes to audience members the right to make the choice of medium for his needs gratifications. This means the media use of an active/rational audience is goal oriented. Ngonso (2019) posits that individuals' and/or groups' level of use of a particular medium would depend on their needs and how much the medium meets such needs. The audience, especially in an era of a rapid rate of media saturation cannot afford to stick to a medium or programme passively because the audience is provided with an opportunity to make a wide range of media and content selections. Such choices could be between Channels Television and Arise Television, Sports Today and Politics Today, Big Brother Naija and State of the Nation, between Vanguard Newspaper and Guardian Newspaper, Punch Newspaper and The Nation, between Business and entertainment news, etc

The role of media audience is important in communication process as it strengthens the relationship between producers and receivers of media contents. This analyzes how contemporary media such as newspapers, radio, television, films, social media, etc vie for the attention of the audience members and evaluates the importance of message structure and content in attracting and maintaining the attention of audience. Media producers spend a lot of time and resources finding who constitute the audience of a programme or message. In other words, this theory concentrates on how users seek media and to what extent they are satisfied with its type, content, and method of use (Amiri, Noori, Basatian, 2012). No wonder Cohen, J. (2001) argued that journalists' "fantasies" about their audience did influence news writing. This has manifested in what informed the core proposition of uses and gratifications theory.

## Components of Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratification Theory has several components as follows:

### a. Active audience

The Uses and gratifications theory actually affords to audience members the right to make the choice of medium for his needs gratifications (Caroline & Oji, 2021). Over time, theories about the audience have changed, the characteristics given to the audience differs greatly. One viewpoint (mass society theory) considers the audience as a large geographically heterogeneous group and at the same time socially inactive. Psychological factors are more determining in defining the audience's behaviour than social factors (De Fluier and Ball-Rokeach, 1982).

In another approach, Bauer (1964) uses the expression "obstinate audience" to show that sometimes the "active audience" does not want to accept what is presented in the media. He considers deliberate selection as one of the important characteristics of the audience. With the introduction of the uses and gratification

theory, a great change occurred in the quality of paying attention to the audience (Windahl *et al.*, 2008) and the researchers in this field assumed that the audience are aware of their own reasons for using media content and can express them (Amiri *et al.*, 2012).

The main assumption of the uses and gratification theory is that the audience are actively seeking content that gives them the highest level of satisfaction (Windahl *et al.*, 2008). In general, the audience's degree of gratification depends on their needs and desires. The more a person feels that the content fulfils his/her need, the more possible the selection of that content. The activeness of the audience is a variable construct recognized with audience demonstrating different degrees and types of activity.

### b. Needs

Discussion on the needs and gratification in relation to uses and gratifications theory often starts with audience' needs. In initial drafts of this model, needs were considered to be equal to the basic human needs. The latest development of this theory shows that the needs are not limited to the five basic needs (Maslow's hierarchy of needs) and also comprise needs such as needs for guidance, security, mutual interaction, and reverting from tension and stress (Windahl *et al.*, 2008).

Katz *et al.* (1974) considered the needs surrounding the uses and gratification theory to be psychological and social. Uses and gratification researchers state that needs create motivation. In other words, motivations are rooted in needs. It can be concluded that there are various underlying motivations for using media. Therefore, the common assumption that people use media for reasons media makers have in mind is false (Windahl *et al.*, 2008).

### c. Gratification

At best, receiving messages should be gratifying. The uses and gratification theory often focuses on gratifications that result from use and do not consider use as a goal. Researchers have stated two different types of gratification; "content gratification" and "process gratification". In content gratification receiving certain messages is more important, while in process gratification, participating in the "use process" is of much higher value (Windahl *et al.*, 2008).

### d. Use and Effect

The pioneers of "uses and gratification" had two major goals. The first goal, which they have considerably achieved, was focusing on the needs of the audience. The second goal was assessing the effect of media, which can be seen in most uses and gratification models. Researchers believe that since people use media for different reasons, the accurate recognition of media's effect is possible only by identifying the reasons for which they are used. The pioneers of this approach emphasized on the fact that people have different reasons for using media and its possible effects. They believe that one person likes a TV program to forget his/her problems, while another one likes that program to obtain information on how a specific group lives in the society. Can it be assumed that the effect of such a program is similar for both people? In other words, different types of uses yield different results and the type of use content, amount and mode of use are important factors in using content for predicting results (Windahl *et al.*, 2008).



## Major imports and application of Uses and Gratifications Theory

As Asemah, Nwammuo and Nkwam-Uwaoma , (2017) highlighted, five basic assumptions were stated as framework for understanding the correlation between media and audience which are as follow:

- i. The audience is conceived as active. That means the mass media use is goal oriented. Media use is tinted towards more or less definite expectations of what certain contents offer to the audience members and what kind of gratification is derived from such consumption.
- ii. Mass communication process is tinted towards linking need gratifications and media choice which is centred on audience-members.
- iii. The media compete with other sources of need satisfaction. This suggests that the need served by mass media and media contents constitutes a segment of the wide range of human needs and the degree to which they can be adequately met through mass media consumption.
- iv. Many of the goals of mass media use can be derived from data supplied by individual audience-members.
- v. That only audience members can evaluate the value of media content and the gratifications obtained from media usage.

This theory can be applied in various areas of research; it can be applied in research that has to do with utilization and adoption of the media; for example, uses and gratifications of social media among the youths, women, and advertising practitioners, etc according to Ruggiero (2000), the theory explains the gratifications consumers seek in a particular medium and its content. The theory also is applied to studies on influence of instructional television programme on children, students and many other related studies (Roy, 2009).

## Strengths and Weaknesses of Uses and Gratifications Theory

Uses and Gratifications theory has its strong and weak points. One of the strengths of uses and gratifications theory is that it allows individual the opportunity to identify their own meaning from the media content without being forced to think in a particular way. The theory brings the idea that the audience are important in communication process, they choose content, they make meaning and they act on that meaning. The media audience cannot be manipulated; they are independent in selection of media platforms and contents. They either accept or reject the media content if they feel what a particular medium present to them is not in tandem with the need they desire to gratify. This is in tandem with Asemah, Nwammuo and Nkwam-Uwaoma, (2017) who posit that uses and gratifications theory is flexible and it vividly discourses how people use the media to satisfy their various needs and purposes.

However, despite the wide range of choices available to media users, they have no control over the media and what it produces. It

is pertinent to state that the audience consume what is solely prepared and presented to them by the media gatekeepers. The media content presented to the audience may be the intention and perception of gatekeepers as informed by the medium house style. The theory also failed to articulate the social background of the media audience in understanding of media use. People cultivate meaning by way of interactions between the individual, peers and social environment. The social and cultural backgrounds of audience-members help to shape their perception of media, content, meaning and the gratifications derived from media use (Kakembo, 2008).

## Conclusion

There is a sharp departure from the past findings in communication research which saw the mass media as all powerful and the media audience as passive, to the limited effects school of thought which treats mass media audience as active media consumers. One of these limited media effect theories is uses and gratifications theory. Uses and gratifications theory which presents the media audience as active and discerning media consumers who select mass media platforms and content that best gratifies their hunger and thirst for information, entertainment and other mass media utilities has become one of the popular theories of mass communication as a result of the availability of multimedia structures. The nature of modern mass media gives the audience the opportunity to select among numerous media platforms and contents. Form the foregoing, the uses and gratifications theory has become one of the central theories on mass media research.

## Recommendations

- i. Media organizations should design diverse and audience-centered content that caters to varying informational, educational, and entertainment needs, recognizing the active role of modern media consumers.
- ii. Communication researchers should focus more on audience behavior and media usage patterns rather than solely on media influence, in line with the uses and gratifications perspective.
- iii. Media practitioners should leverage digital and multimedia platforms to enhance interactivity and user engagement, allowing audiences greater control over content selection and participation.

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