

# Sender-receiver, receiver-sender:

## A uses-and-gratifications study of student journalists' use of social media

Vincent F. Filak

*University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh*

### **Abstract**

Uses and gratifications theory posits that audience members select media to satisfy specific needs. Social media, however, have allowed media users to select both media to consume and what media to produce/share. This study of student journalists (n=285) revealed differences between the importance of specific gratifications in terms of what participants consumed and what they shared. Additionally, the study examines which gratifications were most important in forming a positive attitude toward social media.

### **Introduction**

Student media advisers often find themselves tasked with helping students advance into new realms while simultaneously making sure that the gold standards of media coverage remain the bedrock of their media outlets. The main media values experts often espouse include relevance, usefulness and interest as well as a general sense that content should remain focused on the needs and wants of the audience (Brooks, et al. 2011).

One of the more difficult parts of this process is not only trying to get the students to value a new approach, a new tool or a new concept, but also in trying to make sure that these tools, approaches and concepts are applied in that audience-centric way. For example, while many student newspaper journalists desperately want to write for the opinion page or earn the right to have a weekly column, they often fall into the trap of writing for themselves (Rosenauer & Filak 2013). Thus, their diatribes regarding parking problems, lousy food or disgusting roommates lack broader applicability beyond their own personal pet peeves. Other areas, such as multimedia use on student media outlets' websites also follow this pattern. Koretzky (2010) noted that while college journalists love multimedia content, they often fail to include it in meaningful ways when creating content for their own outlets.

In the Web 2.0 world and beyond, the growth of social media and the explosion of user-generated content have allowed individuals to be both senders and receivers of information (Kietzmann et al 2011). Student journalists can use social media platforms such as Twitter to "live tweet" an event, giving readers the opportunity to learn what is happening as news unfolds. They can also use this platform and others to share stories, promote content and augment coverage. Simultaneously, they can read content from others who are also sharing

information on that topic, learn more about what has happened and engage with an interested set of audience members.

However, the question remains whether a disconnect exists between how student journalists are using social media as senders and how they are using it as receivers. It is also worthwhile to examine to what degree individuals value social media and how it is used. By applying a Uses and Gratifications framework to these questions, this study will examine how student journalists use these outlets and what gratifications they are seeking and obtaining through their sending and receiving of information.

This study is important both theoretically and practically. First, it will explore the tenets of uses and gratification, namely the concept of what is it that people “do” with media, through two key facets within the confines of a single junction point. In other words, it will examine whether a social media user approaches content via the same uses and gratifications in terms of sending material and receiving material. This will help extend the theoretical framework associated with this approach to media use and further its usefulness.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, this study will provide advisers with key insight into how the student journalists are using this media as senders and receivers. This will help advisers to see what draws their students to social media as receivers and then assess to what degree those gratifications are being applied in the sending phases. Thus, advisers can see what students “get” out of social media when they take in content and whether they keep that in mind when they provide other people with social media content. In short, are the students writing for their audience, or are they writing for themselves? This is important because not only can this help pinpoint ways for advisers to advocate for specific uses of social media, but it can also help advisers see if their students are creating social media content that is beneficial and gratifying to readers.

## Literature Review

### *Social Media*

The definitions of social media are vast and often difficult to operationalize, but several key aspects of social media are shared among these definitions.

Scholars have noted that the primary aspects of social media that differentiate them from other media formats include interactivity, many-to-many dissemination and a heavy presence of user-generated content (Kaplan & Haenlein 2010). Within this definition resides the concept of collaboration and sharing, which allows for an individual to be at once a producer and a consumer of the same products.

Social media allow individuals to create a user-centric home for content that interests them, akin to what Negroponte (1995) outlined with his “Daily Me” concept. However, the media also allow for individuals to share content, modify it to suit their needs and participate in a large discussion regarding the content (Kietzmann et al. 2011).

Rosenauer and Filak (2013) noted that social media is best defined in terms of reach and how the material can be shared from many people to many other people, not necessarily based on one set of tools or one particular platform. The authors state that social media approaches can include blogs, microblogging (Twitter), rich site summary (RSS feeds), social networking sites (Facebook, LinkedIn) and reaction tools (comment functions on websites). The key to fully understanding social media, they argue, is to not confuse the

platform with the content.

College news outlets and their advisers have been working to better integrate social media into their approach to news. Wotanis (2013) noted that with a heavy concentration of student users on Facebook, many student newspapers have established a presence on the site as well. She notes that aside from drawing attention from the Facebook audience, using the social media platform allows for the news process to be more immediate, more efficient and more transparent. This is true for both the external audience and the members of the staff. For example, Reimold (2012) noted that members of The Daily Evergreen at Washington State University had combined the traditional news fare of a police ride along with Twitter to create a real-time “tweetalong” experience for readers. Reimold noted that this innovation was a way to improve social media as well as strengthen the relationship between the media and the police.

Brooks (2011) noted that Facebook is an excellent tool to create both camaraderie within the newsroom and to allow for people to migrate to a specific place for information. Being attuned to a social media platform like this can allow for a better sense of what is happening throughout the campus and thus allow the newsroom to find stories that can amplify these topics. McGinley (2011) noted that student media can gain a great deal of value from social media in both the creation and dissemination of information. She stated that student media can use a platform like Facebook to contact sources and generate story ideas at the front of the news process. In addition, the student journalists can then promote the stories and poll students on important topics.

Neville (2011) noted that social media sites like Facebook are appealing because they are often free, have a widespread usage and, in the eyes of students, are fun. In addition, the platform allows for the integration of contacts, visuals and blogging tools for the newsroom. Although students are often distracted while on the site, Neville’s list of positives allows student media outlets to find ways to reach a wider and more engaged audience.

The question for advisers, however, is how to specifically reach the audience members in an effective way via these platforms and how to make social media more than just a novelty. Adapting in this new environment is often difficult for advisers and their newsrooms, as a clear path does not exist for many (DiPalma & Gouge 2013). In Reimold’s discussion with the editor of The Daily Evergreen, the concept of the police “tweetalong” appeared to be both organic and random. Although successful, being able to more specifically target beneficial social media opportunities is necessary for advisers, which is where a broader theory base can be helpful.

Research regarding social media has often looked at specific need satisfactions from a practical standpoint. For example, Briones et al. (2011) found that the American Red Cross engaged in a series of digital media initiatives to engage potential volunteers, alert the media to important events and share information with the community. The authors noted that the wide variety of social media tools, which included blogs, Twitter and Facebook, allowed the Red Cross to create a two-way dialogue that led to faster and better interactions with a variety of publics.

Laire, Casteleyn and Mottart (2012) found that students who used social media tools as part of a second-language learning course reported feeling more involved with the material. Additionally, the authors noted that the students felt as though they were better educated overall due to their use of social media.

Dabner (2012) studied the impact social media use had in regard to a massive earthquake in her native New Zealand. This case study demonstrated that through the use of a central-junction-point website as well as the use of email, the university's emergency management team was able to provide an immediate one-way blast of communication. However, it was the engaging of the community and the sharing of information among the members of the community via a dedicated Facebook page and via Twitter that allowed a more complete set of information to emerge throughout the three-month crisis. The author's study of the University of Canterbury's web-based response to crisis revealed that social media and social networking communities can be invaluable when a surveillance need is dominant for a social group.

Additional examinations of social media have also addressed various underlying needs individuals are attempting to gratify in a wide array of situations. Scholars have studied how social media has been used to help students adjust to college life (DeAndrea et al. 2012), improve social connections between political candidates and potential voters (Hong & Nadler 2012) and address image-repair tactics (Moody 2011) to name a few applications. In each instance, the authors demonstrated that not only is the audience active within this two-way communication paradigm, but also that individuals are using these media for specific purposes.

#### *Uses and Gratifications*

Uses and gratifications theory proposes that human actions are taken in order to satisfy social and psychological needs. The underlying theoretical assumptions of this approach harken to the functionalist perspective and help assess to what degree do people use media to gratify specific, tangible needs.

Ruggerio (2000) noted that these needs include "self-actualization, cognitive needs, (such as curiosity), aesthetic needs, and expressive needs." As need patterns shift, so too will the individuals' gratification desires and approaches. As specific needs return, individuals will return to those actions that yielded the highest level of gratification (Palmgreen, Wenner and Rosengren 1985).

Early research in the area of uses and gratifications proposed the notion that certain forms of media attract and hold audiences because those media satisfy individuals' underlying psychological needs. Much of the research in the 1940s and 1950s examined the usage habits of radio listeners, newspaper readers and other media consumers in an attempt to ascertain who uses which media and why they do so. Despite heavy criticism of the theory as being too individualized and relying too heavily on self-report, the theory continued to build on several key premises. First and foremost, authors were able to establish that the audience members were active participants in their own media usage. In addition, users were able to find specific media that satisfied their needs and were able to deduce which media to select when those needs returned (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch 1974). Finally, researchers established that patterns could be discerned in terms of what people did with media as opposed to what media did to people (Windahl 1981).

The UAG approach has been used to study television (Rubin 1983; Nabi et al 2003), magazines (Payne et al. 1998), telephones (O'Keefe & Sulanowski 1995), instant messaging (Leung, 2001) and the Internet (Charney & Greenberg 2002).

In each instance, a number of specific gratifications have emerged as well

as a solid rationale for media use to satisfy them. For example, Frisby (2004) found in a study of reality-based television viewers that social comparison emerged as a key need for viewers. In many instances, study participants noted they felt better when they were able to compare themselves favorably to the reality-show participants. Abelman, Atkin and Rand (1997) found that viewers of traditional television programs were driven by companionship, escapism and entertainment needs. Additional motivations included time-passing and habitual actions.

In terms of Internet usage, researchers found entertainment, information and diversion to be among the top needs satisfied through usage (Papacharissi 2002, Charney & Greenberg 2001). Additional needs included interpersonal utility (Papacharissi & Rubin 2000), habit (Diddi & LaRose 2006), social interaction and convenience (Ko et al. 2005).

Ruggerio (2000) noted that the growth of interactivity supports and strengthens the underlying assumptions of uses and gratification, as it assesses media effects from a receiver perspective as opposed to a sender perspective. Furthermore, Ruggerio argues that burgeoning media choices and the ability to provide user-generated content via postings and reactions should lead to further applications of the theory.

The study of social media in this regard is relatively thin, but research into various aspects of social networks and social media has revealed patterns in gratification-seeking behavior akin to other media formats. Baek et al. (2011) studied novel motivations for linking and link-sharing behavior on Facebook. The authors examined 217 Facebook users to assess what they shared and why they shared it. The authors revealed that, as is indicated in the term “social media,” participants sought information they found interesting with the intent of sharing it with their “friends” on Facebook. This was akin to other studies that saw interpersonal connections as being key to satisfying knowledge and socialization needs (Lin & Lu 2011).

Hicks et al. (2012) studied participants who used the website Yelp.com from a uses and gratifications perspective as well. The social information site allows users to provide ratings and information about services, businesses and other similar organizations, thus providing a wide array of user-generated content on a broad variety of topics. The authors found that although informational-seeking motives were primary among users, other gratifications including entertainment, interpersonal utility and passing time were also significant predictors of heavy usage.

Perhaps most germane to this study, research into social media has been a mixed bag in regard to uses and gratifications. For example, Steinfeld, Ellison and Lampe (2008) argued that social media improves social connectivity among individuals and spurs the overall sense of socialization. A survey of more than 400 college students revealed that social network sites, such as Facebook, augmented social development and improved the students’ sense of social relationships. The authors found that social media were able to facilitate social interactions and help improve the students’ overall sense of social capital.

That said, not every study on social media has met with similar results. Wang, Tchernev and Solloway (2012) studied the use of social media among college students via a longitudinal examination. The participants reported that four key types of needs (emotional, cognitive, social and habitual) drove them to use social media, but not all needs were gratified through use. The authors found that social needs were dominant in terms of social media usage, but that in many cases, the use of this media did not lead to gratifica-

tion of those needs. However, the researchers did note that ungratified social and habitual needs stimulate additional use of social media. To that end, the expectation of gratification drives the overall usage of social media more so than actual gratification itself.

Other research in this regard has revealed that the social media does not satisfy expected needs, but does lead to the gratification of others. Lai and Turban (2008) noted that although social media was expected to lead to friendships and other similar gratifications, the authors failed to find evidence of this. Rather, social media use correlated with increased work productivity.

Wang and his colleagues note that this lack of consistency across the studies is likely due in part to individual measurements of gratification as well as the relative newness of the media format under examination. That said, the authors did give a passing nod to the possibility that the interactive nature of social media and the fluidity of the content associated with it could also lead to some of these incongruities.

One key study that does provide an important touchstone for this research, however, is Hanson and Haridakis's (2008) look at uses and gratifications as the theory applies to YouTube usage. This research revealed that individuals seek out entertaining items in order to satisfy certain needs while seeking out information-based material to satisfy others. Although that aspect of the work was not particularly revealing, the authors also found that the participants were motivated by certain needs while consuming the media and by other needs while deciding to share or repurpose the content. The authors noted that these differences were likely driven by "the need to express one's self and to have a voice in the marketplace of information" (p. 9).

Based on these theoretical and practical underpinnings, we proposed the following three research questions:

RQ1: Which types of gratifications will participants most attempt to satisfy via the sending and receiving of social media?

RQ2: Which types of gratifications will predict the participants' view regarding the overall importance of social media?

RQ3: Do significant differences exist in how much value participants place on the gratifications based on if they are sending or receiving information?

## Methodology

Participants were gathered from student newsrooms throughout the country via an email message provided through the College Media Association. Members of CMA were encouraged to pass a link to a SurveyMonkey survey to student journalists within the newsrooms they advised.

They were asked to respond to several demographic items before being asked to respond to an item as to whether they used social media, defined for this study as being Twitter and/or Facebook. Those participants who responded that they did not use these forms of social media were sent to the final page of the survey where they were thanked for their participation and thus eliminated from taking part in the rest of the survey.

Participants who said they did take part in social media were asked to respond to several items regarding their level of participation as well as the importance they

felt social media had for them and society at large (e.g. “Social media gets people information in a quick and easy way”). The items were drawn from previous research into social media and Internet studies and linguistically adapted for use in this piece. ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

The survey then asked participants to respond to a series of 18 items that assessed six specific gratifications. The items were drawn from previous work (Papacharissi & Rubin 2000; Sun, Rubin & Haridakis 2008) and each set was linguistically adapted to fit the study here in terms gratifications sought through the sending or receiving of social media. Participants used a 1-7 scale that spanned from strongly disagree to strongly agree in order to rate these statements regarding the reasons they use social media. Participants were asked to rate these items twice: once in regard to how they used the media as a receiver and the second time as to their behavior as a sender.

Entertainment (“It is amusing or fun”), pass time (“It relieves boredom”), knowledge (“It lets me gain knowledge about important topics”), surveillance (“It keeps me up to date on whatever is happening now”) social (“It connects me to people with similar interests”) and self-discovery (“It helps me discover new things about myself”) were each measured with three items that were used to comprise each variable. All 12 variables (six sending needs and six receiving needs) were examined for inter-item reliability and met an acceptable alpha level (all Cronbach’s alphas  $> .7$ ). Each set of items was then combined and averaged to create variable scores.

## Results

Research Question 1 asked which types of gratifications will participants most attempt to satisfy via the sending and receiving of social media?

An analysis of the mean scores of all 12 variables revealed differences in terms of which needs were satisfied in which fashion.

In regard to receiving information via social media, participants rated the surveillance need the highest, followed by knowledge and entertainment. Passing time, socializing and discovery rated the lowest. When it came to sending information via social media, participants rated knowledge and entertainment the highest, with a sharp drop off in mean scores after those two. Surveillance, socializing, passing time and self-discovery followed in descending order of importance. (See Table 1 for mean scores).

Research Question 2 asked which types of gratifications will predict the participants’ view regarding the overall importance of social media.? To examine this question, we conducted two regressions, one for each set of gratification variables, with the social media value variable serving as the DV.

Prior to running the regressions, a correlation matrix was used to examine any potential covariates that needed to be accounted for within the regressions. Gender and year in school positively correlated with several variables and were thus retained for examination within the regressions.

The receiving social media regression was significant (full model adj. R-square = .45,  $p < .001$ ), with several of the variables showing predictive power. Surveillance ( $\beta = .29$ ,  $p < .001$ ) was the strongest predictor among the six variables with self-discovery ( $\beta = .18$ ,  $p < .01$ ), socialization ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and knowledge ( $\beta = .17$ ,  $p < .05$ ) also serving as predictive variables. Entertainment and pass time ( $p > .5$ ) were not significant predictors

In regard to sending social media, the regression was once again predictive (full model adj. R-square = .40,  $p < .001$ ). In this case, surveillance (beta = .27,  $p < .001$ ) and knowledge (beta = .25,  $p < .001$ ) were equally strong predictors, with self-discovery (beta = .11,  $p = .1$ ) showing marginal predictive power. None of the remaining variables were significant predictors ( $p > .3$ ).

Research Question 3 asked if significant differences exist in how much value participants place on the gratifications based on if they are sending or receiving information?

To examine this issue, we conducted a series of matched-pairs t-tests in which each sending gratification was paired with its receiving gratification. In five of the six cases, significant differences existed, with only knowledge ( $t = -.745$ ,  $p > .4$ ) failing to reach significance.

In the cases of entertainment ( $t = 2.37$ ,  $p < .05$ ), passing time ( $t = 5.71$ ,  $p < .001$ ) surveillance ( $t = 7.08$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and socialization ( $t = 2.05$ ,  $p < .05$ ), participants noted a higher agreement level in terms of receiving for gratification instead of sending. In the case of self-discovery ( $t = -5.42$ ,  $p < .001$ ), participants rated the sending gratification higher than the receiving gratification, indicating that sending information via social media was more valuable in gratifying this need than was receiving.

## Discussion

The purpose of this research was to ascertain to what degree social media was being valued, what motivated student newspaper journalists to use it and to what degree those motivations differed based on whether the individuals were consuming or sharing the material. What follows can be of great benefit to advisers who are hoping to help students as they integrate social media into their work routines.

From a practical standpoint, the participants here valued social media. As student journalists, they clearly saw a benefit to being able to receive information in a quick fashion wherever they were. They also saw the benefit this had to their field of journalism and understood it had the ability to inform and engage the public. As social media continues to gain a larger and larger share of the media pie, individuals who want to be informed and who wish to inform others should embrace it. This study demonstrates that these digital natives are on the right path in that regard.

Additionally, the study revealed key disconnects between what the student journalists receive and what they provide in regard to social media. Participants saw social media as an exceptionally valuable tool for remaining up-to-date on current events and being aware of their surroundings. However, they didn't see as much value in terms of sharing that type of "breaking news" with others. As student journalists, the concept of using these platforms to help put out news as it is happening should be second nature.

In another odd twist, individuals rated self-discovery as the least-likely reason they would consume social media, but rated it much higher as a reason to share information with others. This smacks of the "self-as-authority" phenomenon often associated with the third-person effect (Davison 1983), in that the participants felt it was valuable that they help others discover things about themselves, while viewing their own lives as "just fine."

The value of this work for advisers is multifold. First, it is clear that advisers have active and engaged digital natives with an interest in social media. That said, these students seem to lack a clear sense of how best to use it as a tool to further their journalistic

endeavors. As was the case with multimedia content, the students enjoyed consuming the content, but were less likely to use it to enhance others' online experiences. Advisers can relay this data to their students to help increase the congruency between the types of social media content they receive and the types of social media content they send. In this way, the students can use social media more effectively when they attempt to satisfy the needs of their audience members.

Second, and perhaps more importantly, advisers can help student home in on the types of material that will be most gratifying for their readers. The participants in this study tended to see surveillance, knowledge and socialization as the key needs that are satisfied by social media (either sending, receiving or both). In addition, entertainment and pass time needs were found to be insignificant predictors. To that end, advisers can help students understand what types of content and what kinds of approaches to social media will best fulfill the most predictive (and avoid the least predictive) needs.

For example, surveillance needs were most predictive in both regressions. Therefore, advisers can help establish policies and procedures to alert audience members as to important things happening on campus ("President to resign; cites lack of faculty support. More to follow") or provide quick answers to puzzling questions ("Firefighters at Scott Hall say no fire; building steam duct erupted" Or "Chancellor says school will happen. Despite 18in of snow, classes still on"). In addition, the adviser can offer suggestions for types of stories to promote or expand upon via social media. Pieces that augment knowledge regarding school policies and procedures ("Students to see fewer options, higher prices in fall meal plans"), things that offer a broader sense of socialization ("50 things every UWO grad should do before leaving campus") and those that fulfill surveillance needs. Conversely, stories that provide nothing but entertainment ("Read our review of 'Looper' this week!") or that simply pass time can be avoided. Understanding what the audience wants and likes via social media can help the advisers work with students in order to establish a good set of best practices for using this platform.

This study has several limitations. The issue of self-report bias is always key to a uses and gratifications study. In this instance, the individuals might view their consumption of social media as "gaining knowledge" on a topic like a favorite television show by conversing with other fans. A more objective observer could see their actions as being merely socialization, thus shifting the gratification patterns found here. Additional work in this area that includes more specificity in terms of precisely what people consume and why they consume it could be beneficial in addressing this issue. Also, a more broad sample of specific needs could be helpful in further pinpointing what students want in terms of specific forms of social media. For example, what types of things do students expect on Facebook versus Twitter? What specific levels of surveillance are helpful and which levels are repetitive or intrusive? These issues can be examined in future research.

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