

## **A Review of the Uses and Gratification Theory in Social Media**

Elizabeth Melillo

### **Introduction:**

Uses and Gratification theory (UGT) focuses on understanding how and why people use different media to satisfy their particular needs. Beginning in 1944, social scientist Herta Herzog researched the types of satisfaction listeners received when listening to radio programs; she used the word “gratifications” to categorize the various dimensions of satisfaction. In the 1970s, researchers Elihu Katz, Michael Gurevitch and Hadassah Haas added that UGT is based on the “social and psychological origins of needs, which generate expectations of the mass media or other sources, which lead to differential patterns of media exposure, resulting in need gratifications and other consequences” (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016, p. 1,803). In other words, people actively and consciously seek out certain media to fulfill their needs. This was one of the first theories to recognize that people are active, not passive, audience members of the media (Dolan, Conduit, Fahy, & Goodman, 2016, p. 262).

The main overall trend within current UGT research is using UGT to observe social media behaviors due to their popularity and interactive nature. Social media has allowed people now more than ever to actively seek out certain types of media to gratify their needs such as knowledge gain, entertainment, relaxation, social interaction or reward (Dolan, Conduit, Fahy, & Goodman, 2016, p. 262). Furthermore, social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram give users the chance to custom tailor their news feeds, thus leading to selective exposure and introducing the concept of the “Daily Me.” This concept is the idea that people can design and personalize their communication package by using filters and choosing exactly what they want to see. Although many researchers have used UGT to analyze social media, there is a gap when

observing UGT's effects on the concept of the "Daily Me." There is also a gap in social media UGT research when looking at the places of origin of these studies; many recent studies (those done within the past five years) are international and very few recent studies exist within the United States of America.

### **How and Why Consumers Use Social Media:**

Eda Yaşa Özeltürkay, associate professor at Cag University, and Emel Yarimoğlu, assistant professor at Yaşar University, wrote the article "How And Why Consumers Use Social Media: A Qualitative Study Based On User-generated Media And Uses & Gratifications Theory." To determine how and why people use social media, they designed a qualitative study with 23 in-depth interviews. These authors likely chose this methodology so they could effectively gauge patterns, themes and behaviors amongst social media users. This methodology would give them a detailed description of what drives people to seek out social media and what needs they are gratifying by doing so. Although this did not give them a large sample size, it successfully gave them a chance to get an in-depth understanding of social media's thoughts behind their actions.

For their study, Yaşa Özeltürkay & Yarimoğlu (2019) used both UGT and user-generated media content as the lens through which they analyzed social media. They used UGT because it leads to active media participation and note that this theory "explains why people use social media tools, and the theory also asserts that people utilize media because they are seeking to fulfill a need that necessitates being met" (p.143). Also, they define user-generated media content as content created by users that contributes to information on the Internet; the three categories to user-generate media content include consuming, participating and producing (Yaşa Özeltürkay & Yarimoğlu, 2019, p. 147). The researchers chose to use UGT since it offers a way

to understand how and why people seek out various media to fulfill their needs. Their two research questions are “How do consumers use social media within the scope of the UGM [user-generated media]?” and “Why do consumers use social media within the scope of UGT?” (Yaşa Özeltürkay & Yarimoğlu, 2019, p. 147).

Results from the study show that Facebook and Instagram were the most popular social media platforms. Although users login to these platforms every day, many do not share content each time they login; Yaşa Özeltürkay and Yarimoğlu (2019) refer to these users as “silent followers” (p. 157). Researchers postulate that this is due to social pressure; “silent followers” are concerned with how others will perceive and judge their posts and behavior. Moreover, Yaşa Özeltürkay and Yarimoğlu (2019) determined that most users use social media to consume information, to be entertained as “silent followers,” to socially interact with others and to post content about their “self-actualizations” so that they, too, can feel like celebrities and gain recognition (p. 157).

By using UGT to determine how and why people use social media, Yaşa Özeltürkay and Yarimoğlu (2019) present new information to UGT research. The growing popularity and use of social media are changing the way that people receive their information and interact with companies. Therefore, media companies must adapt with these changes to better engage their audiences. Without changing, media companies run the risk of losing its audience, as people can now easily select a different media source that better appeals to them.

### **Usability and Functionality Factors of Social Media:**

Eastern Mediterranean University researchers Orhan Korhan and Metin Ersoy, authors of “Usability and functionality factors of the social network site application users from the perspective of uses and gratification theory,” wanted to use UGT to analyze how and why people

use social media and what aspects of social media apps appeal most to users. They chose this theory because they felt that it “guides the assessment of consumer motivation for media usage and access” (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016, p. 1,799). Korhan, who works in the Department of Industrial Engineering, and Ersoy, who works in the Department of Radio, TV, Film and Journalism, pull from several articles to define UGT. They say this theory is concerned with “how individuals satisfied or gratified their needs regarding content during the use of media” (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016, p. 1,803). The researchers also hoped to analyze various social media’s usability and functionality. They define usability as “the extent to which a web site facilitates users to utilise its functions easily and appropriately” while functionality is defined as “the extent to which the website operates in the way it is structured and is expected to perform as users desire” (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016, p. 1,804).

Using a qualitative approach, the researchers designed a cross-sectional survey to determine the usability and functionality factors of social media apps through UGT (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016, p. 1,804). They conducted the study for undergraduate and graduate students within various faculties and schools in the Eastern Mediterranean University, a university that the authors believe to be “highly international” (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016, p. 1,805). They divided the survey into the following three sections: demographics, analysis of social media user behavior and ratings of social media apps’ usability and functionality (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016, p. 1,806). Korhan and Ersoy (2016) likely chose to implement a large survey to gain insight from a wide range of people. By using a large sample, they gave themselves a better chance of having a more accurate representation of the population and their social media behaviors.

The survey findings determined that most social media users prefer to use the platforms to keep in touch with their friends and family, to receive news, to learn new information or to be

entertained. Korhan and Ersoy (2016) note that these qualities gratify the respondents' socialization, entertainment and learning needs (p. 1814). When looking at UGT, respondents scored Instagram as giving them the highest satisfaction. The researchers believe that this is because users now prefer to receive quick and short visual information rather than in-depth information. Moreover, respondents said Twitter and Skype were the most usable and functional. Interestingly, Facebook received the lowest usability and functionality scores even though it is the most downloaded and used app. According to survey participants, the most important usability factor is the app's "ease of use" and its "learnability" while the most important functionality factor is "personalization" (Korhan & Ersoy, 2016, p. 1,809).

Understanding social media's usability and functionality offers a different perspective into UGT research and gives scholars another way to think about why people choose the social media they choose. Korhan and Ersoy recognize that gratifying needs might not be someone's number one reason for going to social media; rather, people might choose a certain medium due to its ease of use or convenience. The findings from this article reaffirm that people love to use social media for entertainment, socialization and requirement of news. The authors' realization that people now prefer to use convenient, easy-to-learn-and-use apps to see short, visual messages is also vital for media companies to understand. If media companies fail to understand this and adjust their messages accordingly, they might lose their audience to other noise within that user's life.

### **Common denominators:**

Both of these articles have several common denominators that display a trend within studies of UGT. First, both studies use a qualitative approach. Although the Korhan and Ersoy (2016) study uses a survey while the Yaşa Özeltürkay and Yarimoğlu (2019) study uses an

in-depth interview, both groups of scholars believed that a qualitative approach would allow them to receive a better understanding and explanation of social media behavior through UGT. Next, both articles have a similar purpose of trying to determine what causes people to seek out social media, why do people use social media, what needs become gratified through social media usage and how do people use social media. Lastly, each article utilizes a different route to look at UGT (Korhan and Ersoy utilized usability and functionality and Yaşa Özeltürkay and Yarimoğlu used user-generated media content), but came to similar conclusions. People use social media for the same several reasons: to socially interact with others, to keep up with friends and family, to be entertained and to receive information/get the news.

**Conclusion:**

Yaşa Özeltürkay, Yarimoğlu, Korhan and Ersoy all ask the same question, “How and why do people use social media?” Despite using different qualitative methods, all of the authors used UGT to analyze social media behavior. Results from the Yaşa Özeltürkay and Yarimoğlu (2019) study discovered the existence of “silent followers” and concluded that people actively seek out social media to gratify their needs. These needs are to gain information, receive news, socialize and be entertained. Even though this study successfully expands upon UGT research, its methodology might make some question the validity of the results. Some might argue that only interviewing 23 people does not give an accurate representation of the population. Future research might consider using this article and expanding upon the findings by interviewing more people to make it more reliable and accurate.

Furthermore, the Korhan and Ersoy (2016) study agreed with the findings of the Yaşa Özeltürkay and Yarimoğlu (2019) study, but it also brought something new to the UGT research pool. It found that social media users prefer short, visual messages instead of long, wordy ones.

Additionally, people actively seek out social media apps that are convenient, easy to use, easy to learn and able to be personalized. These findings might urge media companies to alter the way they give messages to people and through what means. This study did a better job than the Yaşa Özeltürkay and Yarimoğlu (2019) study at using a large enough sample size to accurately represent the population. Korhan and Ersoy also made sure to completely explain their key concepts, goals and statistics; this leaves no doubt in the reader's mind as to the validity of the study.

While both of these articles offer major contributions to the UGT research, there is a gap in regard to UGT and selective exposure on social media. In my research proposal, I intend to fill this gap by proposing a qualitative study that uses UGT to look at the concept of the "Daily Me" to determine how and why people use social media to selectively receive certain information. As previously mentioned, this concept asserts that people actively customize the news they expose themselves to (perhaps in a subconscious effort to reaffirm their beliefs on a certain topic). People are therefore often only seeing one side of an argument within mass communication. One example of this occurs on social media when people usually only "follow" pages they like and rarely "follow" pages they dislike. Users also might only follow people with similar political views as them. UGT is arguably the best lens to look at the concept of the "Daily Me" through since UGT states that people use media to gratify certain needs/wants and that they actively control their media consumption.

## Works Cited

- Dolan, R., Conduit, J., Fahy, J., & Goodman, S. (2016). Social media engagement behaviour: a uses and gratifications perspective. *Journal of Strategic Marketing*, 24(3/4), 261–277.  
<https://doi-org.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/10.1080/0965254X.2015.1095222>
- Korhan, O., & Ersoy, M. (2016). Usability and functionality factors of the social network site application users from the perspective of uses and gratification theory. *Quality & Quantity: International Journal of Methodology*, 50(4), 1799–1816.  
<https://doi-org.libezp.lib.lsu.edu/10.1007/s11135-015-0236-7>
- Yaşa Özeltürkay, E., & Yarimoğlu, E. (2019). How and Why Consumers Use Social Media: A Qualitative Study Based on User-Generated Media and Uses & Gratifications Theory. *Journal of the Cukurova University Institute of Social Sciences*, 28(1), 142.



# **A Review of the Uses and Gratification Theory in Social Media**

Elizabeth Melillo

Manship School of Mass Communication, Louisiana State University

MC 7021: Mass Communication Theory

April 2020