Social and Usage-Process Motivations for Consumer Internet Access

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ABSTRACT

Differences between light and heavy users of America Online are investigated using theoretical expectations derived from recent research on uses and gratifications theory. Measures of Internet-usage-process gratifications and Internet socialization gratifications were utilized to test for differences between light and heavy Internet users in the consumer market, and it was expected that heavy users would be more socially motivated in their Internet use while light users would be more motivated by gratifications related to usage processes. However, results indicate that both heavy and light users are more motivated by usage factors, although the difference between usage and social motivation was more pronounced for heavy users. Heavy users are more socially motivated than light users, but both heavy and light users show a significant preference for process uses and gratifications as compared to social uses and gratifications for Internet use.

Keywords: behavioral factors; Internet; uses and gratifications; user motivations

INTRODUCTION

Looking back on its consumer-market introduction and early growth phases, the Internet has dramatically changed society in terms of its communication and consumption behaviors. It was predicted soon after its introduction to the general public that the Internet would have important social implications (Artle & Averous, 1973), and recent years have been spent recognizing and observing this social impact as it has manifested itself in the consumer marketplace. The proliferation of Internet service providers (ISPs), instant messaging, e-mail, chat rooms, Web
logging, and the like are all emblematic of the new and important social role that Internet use plays in daily life.

In the process of adopting the Internet as a communication channel, society has been evolving away from traditional mass-exposure media in favor of the emerging interactive medium (Drèze & Zufryden, 1997; Stafford & Stafford, 1998), in which users actively involve themselves (i.e., interact) with the medium to personally direct its content retrieval and display. Along the way, individual communication patterns have also evolved toward a more network-enabled interactive social model as individuals proceed to utilize the new communications capabilities of the Internet medium to interact with each other (Rogers & Albritton, 1995). While much of the recent focus on the Internet has been on the transactional properties of the medium for e-commerce purposes, scholars have always recognized that the evolution of the Internet would serve both transactional and communicative goals (Drèze & Zufryden; Eighmey & McCord, 1998; Lohse & Spiller, 1998).

This study reports on consumer motivations related to the use of the Internet via the America Online (AOL) Internet-access service; although there are a number of ways to gain access to the Internet, including always-on business and government broadband network connections, the predominant consumer-market mode of access for the majority of users is still through ISP services (“U.S. Home Broadband Penetration,” 2004), of which AOL holds an appreciable share of the market (IDC, 2004). Hence, what is learned about Internet use in a broad study of AOL users can be representative of the broader consumer market for Internet use (Stafford, Stafford, & Schkade, 2004).

Uses and gratifications theory (U&G) is utilized to investigate Internet-related motivations and enjoyments, and associated uses. A large sample of America Online users is surveyed, and subsequent analysis is performed with U&G measures to identify differences between heavy and light users with regard for their preference for, and motivations related to, uses and gratifications for Internet use.

LITERATURE AND HYPOTHESES

Researchers freely recognize the media-like capabilities and characteristics of the Internet (Armstrong & Hagel, 1996; Eighmey & McCord, 1998; Kannan, Chang, & Whinston, 1998; Turban, Lee, King, & Chung, 2000). In considering the Internet from a media-use perspective, robust theoretical models from previous investigations of various media can be applied; one of these is uses and gratifications, which is a special model of communications theory useful for understanding the adoption of new computer-mediated communication technologies.
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