AN EVALUATION OF THE USES AND GRATIFICATIONS OF THE NEW MEDIUM, THE INTERNET

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In today’s multimedia scenario, Internet is rapidly gaining in popularity and importance. Internet today is becoming a part of life. It is not just a technology, but an engine of social change, one that has modified work habits, education, social relations and maybe most important, our hopes and dreams. It first challenged and then fundamentally changed the way people learn, play, create, communicate and conduct business. It is a social space, a milieu, made up of and made possible by communication, the cornerstone of community and society. The Internet is a medium like the town crier, the newspaper, the book, the telegraph, telephone, radio, and television set. Undoubtedly, it is a unique medium and the most sophisticated of all the media developed so far. The greatest legacy of this medium is the way it has effaced distances and made people gather information with ease and communicate instantaneously. The Internet has ballooned our orientation, metamorphosed us into global citizens, feeling connected seamlessly.

Its increasing popularity as a communication medium has garnered the attention of communication scholars, particularly in the developed countries, to fathom its promising developments, uncertainties and unsolved challenges in the horizon of the cyber society. During the two past decades, Internet research has slowly assumed salience and communication scholars are seeking to fathom the multidimensional parameters of Internet as a medium and its uses by an increasing number of people everywhere. In India, Internet research is in its infancy. There is a pressing need to throw more light on the social aspects of this powerful medium, which is rapidly becoming popular among all sections of people.
The nature of the Internet can well be understood from the wide range of activities pursued on it by people hailing from different backgrounds. The net is so vast and growing at lightning speed that each person’s experience with it can only be a tiny sample of the whole. Each user partakes of different Internet niches and the experience leaves one with markedly different views. “I am not sure that I know what the Internet is; I am not sure that anyone does” said James Costigan. The chameleon like nature of Internet makes it difficult to define it in specific terms. Its mutability makes it like a bowl of jelly, keeps on changing, meaning different things to different people at different times.

Its uses and applications are varied; while some uses are extensions of the older media, some other uses are unique to this new medium. In this context, this study was a timely attempt to gain a better understanding of the uses and gratifications of Internet. The benefit internet is capable of providing to the society depends to a large extent on what the users do with it. Such an assertion stems from the fact that audiences are active as well as selective in using a medium and its varied content. Against the backdrop of the notion of active audience, the present study sought to explore and map the uses and gratifications of Internet in India.

In the context of paucity of studies in the Indian context it was pertinent to gauge the uses and gratifications associated with the new medium of Internet in Indian context, especially among students who happen to be the most avid users of Internet. How has internet fitted in the media usage pattern? What gratifications are being sought by students from the Internet? Which socio demographic variables define their gratification seeking behaviour? Answer to these and related questions formed the essence of this study

**Organization of the Study**

The details of the study are presented in five chapters. To provide a comprehensive background to this study, the first chapter throws light on the evolution and nature of the Internet and its relevance in the uses and gratifications framework. The
positive and negative dimensions of internet and the different trends of internet research are also dealt with in this chapter. The next chapter of the thesis presented a review of Internet studies from the uses and gratifications perspective. The third chapter deals with the study objectives and methodology. In the fourth chapter results of analysis are presented in seven sections. These findings form the central segment of this chapter. The final chapter discussed the important findings and conclusions drawn. The chapter also identified areas for further studies so as to validate the findings and firm up the conclusions

**The study objective**

The severe paucity of research on users and uses of Internet in India called for the conduct of exploratory studies so as to map Internet usage habits and motives among students. Hence, the study was conceived as exploratory in nature and was designed to investigate a wide gamut of areas ranging from students’ Internet use habits, affinity, gratifications and the differences among students belonging to various socio demographic backgrounds. These were some of the aspects this study delved into with the following specific objectives:

1. To assess students’ usage patterns of Internet and other mass media – newspapers, magazines, television and radio – in terms of usage (i) regularity and (ii) time spent.
2. To assess students’ Internet usage (i) longevity, (ii) regularity and (iii) time spent in respect of users’ socioeconomic variables: gender, age, education, income and location.
3. To assess students’ Internet affinity and correlate it with Internet usage (i) longevity, (ii) regularity and (iii) time spent.
4. To gauge students’ Internet affinity variations, if any, in respect of users’ gender, education, income and location; and correlate Internet affinity with Internet satisfaction.
5. To assess the gratifications students seek from the Internet.
6. To examine the bearing of students’ gender, age, education, income and location on their Internet gratifications.

**Study Design and Methodology**

New media researchers have made use of a number of methodologies independently or in combination to gain information on use and gratification patterns. Perhaps due to the nature of the Internet, surveys have been used more often in previous studies, though a few have conducted content analysis and experiments. Survey method was used in this study and the data was collected from the sampled groups of students through a structured questionnaire.

The universe of this study was students in Kerala studying in class IX, X, Plus One and Plus Two courses in higher secondary schools, and Undergraduate and Post Graduate courses in colleges. To arrive at a representative student sample of Internet users in the state of Kerala, a multi-stage sampling procedure was adopted. Three districts in Kerala, were randomly selected from south, central and north Kerala; Thiruvananthapuram, Ernakulam, and Kozhikode. In the second stage, two higher secondary schools and two colleges were randomly selected from each district. Thus a total of six higher secondary schools, and six colleges represented the entire state. A total of 900 students were surveyed in the three districts; 300 each in Thiruvananthapuram, Ernakulam, and Kozhikode districts respectively. However some questionnaires were incomplete in one way or other, so they were eliminated. The effective sample size was reduced to 717. The data collection was completed in the month of September 2009.

The questionnaire included items to elicit data on key variables such as students’ socio demographic variables; Internet and mass media usage; Internet affinity, Internet satisfaction; and the motives, i.e., gratifications sought from Internet. A 30-item Internet gratification or motives scale was formulated.

In this study, Internet usage pattern was explored from three perspectives of (i) longevity of use, (ii) regularity of use, and (iii) time spent using Internet. The
data generated from above described instruments was analyzed in respect of the five socio demographic variables: age, gender, education, location, and income to examine whether these have any bearing on Internet use and gratification and affinity to Internet

**Major findings**

The analysis yielded a wide array of results pertaining to internet use by students. A gist of the findings is detailed below.

1. **Use patterns of internet and other media**

A comparison of the mass media usage pattern in terms of time spent with different media clearly pointed out that television held the first position and internet the second position. In contrast to print media, students used internet for longer duration of time. For a new medium like internet this was impressive though internet based activities require the user to spend longer duration of time as compared to other media. The correlation of the time spent using internet and other media revealed that, those spending more time on internet activity also tended to spend relatively more time reading newspapers and magazines and vice versa.

2. **Longevity of internet use**

A significant majority of the students were using internet for a long period of either one year to three years or more than three years. Longevity of internet use was found to be dependent on the socio demographic variables of education, place of residence and economic status.

In respect of level of education, school and post graduate students had a longer experience of internet use than graduate students. Between urban and rural students, the former had longer internet experience than their rural counterparts. That rural students formed the bulk of the newest users of internet substantiates
the proposition that media advent is urban centric and subsequently it spreads from the urban centers to rural hinterlands.

In terms of economic status, the rich students were found to have a head start over the poor in the longevity of internet use. This again validates the idea that as with many other new technologies, those with greater disposable income are almost always the ‘early adopters’.

3. **Regularity of internet use**

The analysis pertaining to the regularity of internet use pointed to the presence of digital divide amongst students. Their regular use of internet was dependent on the attributes of socio demographic variables: gender, education level, age, place of residence and economic status. Regular use of internet was more salient among male students than female students. Likewise, it was significantly higher among school going, lower aged, urban and high income group students.

4. **Internet time spent**

The time spent by students on internet based activity was independent of three socio demographic variables of gender, age and place of residence of students. Nevertheless, the other two variables of education and income had a bearing on students’ internet time spent. In the sample as a whole, most students used internet either for half-an-hour to one hour or for the next higher slab of one-hour to two- hours.

On analyzing the internet time spent in terms of students’ economic background, it was found that more students from middle and high income families tended to spend more time using internet than students from low income families.

5. **Internet Affinity**

The study assessed students’ affinity with internet to gauge the importance they attach to the new medium. The affinity score could range from 5 – 25. The
analysis showed that students had a moderate mean affinity score of 13.12. With such a moderate mean score, students’ internet affinity could best be described as moderate. The findings negate the popular notion that students have a strong affinity to internet.

Though moderate, Internet affinity had a strong positive linear correlation with internet-use regularity, longevity, and time spent. The strongest correlation was between internet affinity and regularity of internet use.

In respect of demographic variables, internet affinity was found to be higher among males than females. But it was similar across groups of the other four demographic variables of education, age, income, and rural - urban backgrounds of students.

On examining, the link between internet satisfaction and affinity, a weak positive relation was noted. Although a large majority of students appeared to be satisfied with internet, they had not yet developed a commensurately strong attachment with the medium.

6. Internet Gratifications

The analyses revealed the nature of gratifications students sought from internet and the differences in the gratification seeking behaviour of students belonging to various socio-demographic antecedents such as gender, education and economic status.

The principal component analysis and the Varimax rotation of 30 motives for using internet yielded six gratifications named as (i) passing time & habit, (ii) social interaction, (iii) entertainment, (iv) education, (v) IT application, and (vi) financial benefits.

In general, students were found using internet primarily for the two ritualistic gratifications of passing time and habit, and entertainment. The remaining four instrumental or goal directed gratifications of social interaction, education, IT
application and financial benefits were of lesser importance to students. In particular, the use of internet for educational gratification was not as salient as its use for maintaining social interactions and seeking financial benefits.

7. Internet Gratification and Demographics Variables

The independent variable of gender had a significant bearing on all gratifications except the two, namely IT application and financial benefits. The tendency of using internet for the gratification of passing time & habit, social interaction, and entertainment was more salient among female students than male students. Using internet for education gratification was more salient among male students than female students.

The students’ urban-rural background had no bearing on the three gratifications of passing time & habit, social interaction and financial benefits. On the other three gratifications, the urban-rural students differed. The tendency of using internet for entertainment and education was more pronounced among rural students. Urban students on the other hand were using internet to learn about computer use and IT application more than their rural cousins.

The analysis of variance revealed that the independent variable of students’ educational level defined five of the six gratifications sought by students from internet. The lone gratification which was not being defined by the education level of students was the gratification of passing time & habit. The tendency of seeking the dominant gratification of passing time & habit was similar across the three educational groups – school students, graduate students and post graduate students. These findings clearly illustrate the similarities and differences of internet use and gratification among various social categories of the student community.
Conclusion

Some of these findings are on expected lines, some are pointers to future trends, and their implications are thought provoking, especially in the light of increasing diffusion of Internet in Indian society. The results lend support to the existence of digital divide as well as gender gap among the student community.

In a nutshell, the findings clearly point out that students have come to use internet along with other media. The finding that most of the newest users of the net are school students suggests that as they grow in age and education their dependency on the net may get firmed up enabling it to become the most preferred medium on par with television, if not exceeding it.

But the findings relating to the gratification seeking tendencies, though on par with most of the findings elsewhere, demand the attention of the society, in particular the education subsystem. Concerns arise as a large majority of students are using Internet for the two ritualistic gratifications of passing time and entertainment. The tendency of using Internet for educational content is far away from becoming the dominant internet gratification. Students are not seeking internet for deriving educational benefits in spite of the fact that the www is a treasure trove of information and education on every conceivable subject. They are yet to realize its immense potential in serving their education related needs. Some of the major reasons for such a showing could be the lack of awareness about the education potential of the net, lack of efficacy in searching for educational content and limited high speed access. Language barriers in educational content could also be hindering the use of Internet for educational purposes. Exact reasons need to be ascertained through in-depth interviews with students.

That the ritualistic gratification of passing time and habit followed by entertainment stood out as the prime gratifications being sought from internet by a large majority of students is disturbing as it negates the multimedia and interactive potentials of internet to serve the important instrumental uses of
education and learning. Therefore, it is essential to conduct studies to ascertain whether the ritualistic gratification is as dominant elsewhere as in Kerala so as to formulate measures dovetailed to make students seek instrumental gratifications.

The existence of ‘digital divide’ that was detected in this study makes it essential to ascertain whether ‘digital divide’ has pan Indian pervasiveness. A more in-depth understanding of the possible sources of this inequality is required so as to decipher ways to bridge the gap. If the Internet has to really live up to its expectations in a developing country like India, there is need to pull down the barriers causing the digital divide so that it can engage people on a more equal footing. Research into these aspects is the need of the hour.

The new media scenario is undergoing a transformation. Therefore, longitudinal studies preferably with panel design need to be conducted to detect changing trends across time in Internet uses and gratifications among students and other age and profession groups. Such studies besides providing a new theoretical framework to explain Internet will perhaps also give a framework for formulating policies suited to prevailing conditions.