

Uses and Gratification Theory & How TikTok Affects The Body Images Of Young Adults

Introduction:

Everyday we consume media, whether it be watching the news or our favorite television show, scrolling through social media, or listening to music. We do these daily because it brings us some form of gratification. Depending on the motivation behind heading to a form of media, a person will specifically choose a platform that will satisfy their desires at that moment. This is where the Uses and Gratification Theory comes into play. This theory is used in many forms of research on all forms of media, especially social media as of recently, and it is constantly evolving as media expands and changes.

Uses and Gratification Theory Explained:

Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz's Uses and Gratification Theory suggests that people who consume media are the ones who actively choose and use the media. The process of choosing a piece of media is goal oriented to fulfill their personal needs (Caldwell, 2001). This theory has social-physiological roots and is proven to be an axiomatic theory. An axiomatic theory is one that is self-evident. This is due to the fact that it is applicable to a very wide range of situations pertaining to media (Lin, 1996) According to Carolyn Lin, this theory gets its strength from its ability to, "Allow researchers to study mediated communication situations via a single or multiple sets of psychological needs, psychological motives, communication channels, communication content, and psychological gratifications within a particular or cross-cultural context," (Lin, 1996, p.574).

The Uses and Gratification Theory relies on two principles: 1. Consumers of media are active in their choice of media being consumed and 2. They know why they choose the media they choose to consume (Potter, 2012). The first principle is where “uses” comes from and the second principle is where “gratification” comes from in the name “Uses and Gratification Theory.” Looking at this theory from this perspective of principles, it can be said that usage of media is not a passive action, but an action with purpose and motivation. When a person knows what exactly their purpose and motivation are when using media, they are able to choose what kind they use in order to satisfy their needs (Potter, 2012).

There are five basic assumptions that encompass the Uses and Gratification Theory. 1. The audience is conceived as active. 2. In the mass communication process much initiative in linking need and gratification and media choice lies with the audience member. 3. The media competes with other sources of need satisfaction. 4. Many of the goals that media uses can be derived from data supplied by the individual audience members themselves. 5. Value judgements about cultural significance of mass communication should be suspended while the audience operations are explored on their own terms (Malloli, 2020).

People utilize media to meet certain needs including cognitive, affective, social integrative and tension release needs. Cognitive needs are intellectual needs where people use media to gain knowledge and find information. Affective needs are emotional needs; therefore, people will go to the media to satisfy any kind of feelings, pleasures or emotions they are seeking. Social Integrative needs are interactive needs with family, friends and society. Social media networks are where people go to satisfy this need. Lastly, tension release needs are the needs of escaping and disconnecting from others (Malloli, 2020).

According to the book *Uses and Gratification Research* from Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973), there have been studies that show that gratification can come from at least three different origins including “media content, exposure to the media *per se*, and the social context that typifies the situation of exposure to different media,” (p.514). If a person wants to relax, they may sit down and watch television; however, if they want to feel that their time relaxing is more worthwhile, they may read a book instead. Oftentimes friends and family “spend time together” by watching television or going to a movie theater when in reality they are consumed by the screen, not actually socializing with one another (Katz et al., 1973).

The main gratifications that researchers found to be the most prominent in their research are information seeking, socializing, entertainment, status, pass time, convenience and personal identity (Ahlse et al., 2020). “Information seeking” motives look at how different media provide its users with their informational needs. This could mean having the desire to know what is going on in other people’s lives or any other information they want to know. “Socializing” refers to the use of social media meeting the needs of socialization. An example of this behavior would be progressing relationships by interacting online. “Status” is concerned with users utilizing social media for the chance of gaining popularity or fame. This is rooted by the need to have good self esteem and confidence from feeling important by their online community. “Convenience” refers to how easy it is to utilize media and the fact that media is constantly at our fingertips. Media is also free to our exposure, making it more accessible and convenient. “Personal Identity” supports individuals using social media to create their own identity and perceptions. Social media allows users to express themselves through their personal values and beliefs (Ahlse et al., 2020)

Origin of Uses and Gratification Theory:

Before the Uses and Gratification Theory came about, early mass communication theories argued that media had a direct influence on individuals. They believed that these individuals were unable to create their own opinions because they were so easily influenced by the media. It was assumed that everyone who consumed media became a group of people who were unable to withstand the impression mass media had on them. When the focus on the direction of the goal was altered is when the Uses and Gratification Theory was sought after (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).

In the 1940s, the Uses and Gratification Theory was introduced and studied by scholars but the theory only focused on the reasoning behind people choosing certain pieces of media. As the years went on, the focus remained on the gratifications that media users desired. Thirty years later, the focus shifted to what outcomes came from media consumption along with the social and physiological gratification media gave people. In 1974, the Uses and Gratification Theory was finally credited to Jay Blumler and Elihu Katz (Ruggeiro, 2000). Due to the constant evolution and growth of media, this theory is constantly evolving and being used in research when studying the effects of media on humans.

Uses and Gratification Theory Application to Social Media

Social gratification that was once satisfied through face-to face human interactions is now often fulfilled through social media. In today's society, people of all ages can sit with their face on a screen for hours instead of socializing with people in person. Every aspect of social media gives gratification to the user. This can be split into three categories: Content gratification, process gratification and social gratification. The content of the media itself provides gratification with information and knowledge. The actual process of scrolling through and

browsing social media offers another form of gratification. Media provides social gratification through its ability to create relationships through networks such as Facebook and Twitter (Malloli, 2020).

By studying social media through the lens of Uses and Gratifications, there have been two trends found (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010). The first trend being that social media users do not grasp one specific media platform, but instead use multiple platforms as a collection of tools for communication. This shows that social media platforms do not replace one another. They merge together and are used in support of each other because each one supports different needs or gratifications. The second trend is that users use new social media platforms and learn how to use them to their advantage as part of their collection of communication tools. Digital technologies have been following social trends for years and users capitalize on these technologies, make it reach its highest popular demand and then make its daily usage become steady. As new forms of media sites are released, these sites become popular and eventually get steadily used as new platforms release and become popular. For example, the use of instant messaging began to decrease as social media became people's main source of communication. However, even though social media became popular, people did not stop using instant messaging, it just became a secondary source of communication (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).

The main gratifications that researchers found to be the most prominent in their research on Uses and Gratification in social media are information seeking, socializing, entertainment, status, pass time, convenience and personal identity. 'Information seeking' motives look at how different media provide its users with their informational needs. This could mean having the desire to always know what is going on in other people's lives or keeping up with the latest trends. 'Socializing' is people utilizing social media platforms to fulfill their social needs. They

do this through online interactions with other users. 'Entertainment' focuses on individuals using social media because they find it fun or a form of relaxation. These platforms may be used to pass time or as a distraction from real life (Ahlse et al., 2020). 'Status' is the idea that users have the opportunity to become popular on social media and gain recognition. This drives people's self esteem up because they feel more important and this leads to more openness to sharing information online. 'Convenience' motive follows how easy social media is to access and use. These apps are free and make communication easier, making convenience a huge motive to use them. Lastly, 'personal identity' focuses on individuals' ability to create their own identity through self expression on different platforms. They are able to illustrate their beliefs, values and attitudes through social media (Ahlse et al., 2020).

Reflecting upon the gratification of "status," research has shown that there are constraints on obtaining status when it comes to privacy controls. Depending on a person's attitude towards their personal privacy online, they may have difficulties acquiring a certain status they would wish for. In order to gain more attention through followers, likes and engagement, users must share more information about themselves (Quinn, 2016). The uses and gratification of social media depend upon the user's specific goals they want to achieve from it and these goals may affect their attitude on their own privacy or vice versa. In order to maintain certain social boundaries, users will often create multiple profiles. Amongst these profiles, users will post content and information based on the specific goal gratification intended for that profile (Quinn, 2016). For example, many people create multiple Instagram accounts. One account is more-so for the public eye where the user does not disclose much personal information. The user then creates another account, aka a "finsta" or "fake Instagram," which is private, only certain people are accepted to follow it and they post a great amount of personal information. Typically the

account intended for the public eye has the gratification of status and socializing and the “finsta” gratification is entertainment and personal identity.

As stated earlier, social networking sites do not replace each other, but are used collectively because of the different gratifications they provide. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok are all platforms that many people choose to use to meet their personal desires of gratification. Facebook is the oldest of the four platforms and was developed in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg. This site allows users to create personal profiles, follow friends, send messages, create or join virtual groups and more. Research has found that Facebook is mainly used for “social searching” which is maintaining contact and learning more about people you already have relationships with offline rather than “social browsing” which is using social media to create new relationships online. The gratifications that come from Facebook are information seeking and socializing. Users typically utilize Facebook to know what is going on in other people’s lives and to keep in touch with old and current friends (Quan-Haase & Young, 2010).

Twitter is a microblogging platform where users can follow other users and share tweets, which are 280 character messages. It was founded in 2006 by Jack Dorsey, Noah Glass, Biz Stone, and Evan Williams. Some say that, “Twitter was a way to form connections in real time with thousands of people who shared your interests or a way to get to know strangers through the details of their lives,” (Chen, 2011, p.755). Where Facebook is a platform to stay connected with people users know offline, Twitter is a platform where people can create new relationships through the platform. The main gratification that comes from Twitter is the need to connect. This gratification does not simply come from tweeting and retweeting posts, but rather from the fact that these functions mediate conversations amongst people (Chen, 2011).

Instagram is a photo and video sharing social networking service where users can follow other users, and like, comment and share posts. It was launched in 2010 by Kevin Systrom and Mike Krieger, but in 2012 it was bought by Facebook. The main gratification that comes from Instagram is socializing. Users make new friends from this app through commenting on each other's photos. Due to the vulnerability and personal aspect of sharing photos online, researchers believe Instagram to have a higher level of socialization compared to just leaving comments on posts. People post on Instagram with the intent of their friends interacting with them through comments and likes, making their motive to use Instagram be interaction (Oloo, 2013).

TikTok is a short video sharing app that was created by ByteDance. It started off as Musical.ly, but in 2018, ByteDance rebranded the app into TikTok. TikTok reaches the most gratifications out of all social media platforms (Ahlse et al., 2020).

Because of TikTok's algorithm, it is one of the simplest applications to become famous off of; therefore, one of its gratifications is status. Researchers have found that the content made on TikTok has made one of the most prominent gratifications be personal identity.

Self-actualization, self-enhancement and self-expression are extremely present on TikTok due to its user generated content where users are free to create whatever kind of content they want.

Another gratification from TikTok is entertainment. Users go on the app to have fun, relax and take a break from their reality around them. Due to the current popularity of TikTok and its ability to create new trends, many people use it for information seeking purposes. Being on the app allows users to stay up to date on trends and know what is going around on social media.

Another reason to be present on TikTok is for socialization. Because of the many interactive features--commenting, liking, sharing, duetting, stitching and live videos--it makes socializing easy and apparent. Lastly, TikTok is convenient. The app is simple to use as all you have to do as

a viewer is open the app and begin scrolling. If you want to post a video, you press record and upload. Convenience is a huge motivating factor for this platform. (Ahlse et al., 2020).

Media Analysis: *How TikTok affects young adults' body image*

TikTok is one the most popular social media applications today. This video-sharing app is a place where users can post short videos of just about anything ranging from comedy, dancing, relatable content, skits, and so much more. These videos are put on other users' For You Pages (FYP) using an algorithm through which they may be liked, shared, duetted, stitched and commented on. While this platform provides its users with a sense of community and acceptance, it also is a portal for judgment from others and of one's own self. Before TikTok, Instagram was the main platform where young adults would often compare themselves to others through still images. However, the dynamic of TikTok in comparison to Instagram allows for much more critique and shame because of the language and content present on the app. There are two different categories of TikTok users who experience the effects of body shaming: viewers and creators.

Mental health from a viewer's perspective

Just like any social media platform, it is difficult to scroll through your feed and not compare yourself to others. TikTok makes the process of comparison even easier due to its trends and usage of real video. Since this platform is strictly videos, it is essentially all real footage without any Photoshop as you often see on Instagram. Despite the power of lighting and angles, most viewers believe the videos are real and not touched up. The instinct to compare is stronger

with this understanding of the content available. TikTok constantly has trends geared towards “skinny girls.”

A trend that went around was content set to Megan Thee Stallion’s song “Body,” where girls would make a video compilation with pictures of their bodies in bikinis or revealing outfits. Just about everyone who made these videos were girls with society’s definition of a “perfect” body: flat stomach and a tiny waist. The purpose of this was said to be a “body positivity trend” but girls who did not meet society’s body standards were not agreeing with this statement. Just some of the comments under these videos include:

“More like ‘make people insecure trend’.”

“This is just making me more insecure.”

“No, that’s only attractive people to get clout and make others hate their body.”

“This trend is why I’m insecure.”

“I will be leaving TikTok until this trend ends due to a lingering eating disorder.”

Some people even left comments directly about themselves more specifically:

“My confidence went bye bye.”

“I’m gonna go on a diet to look like her.”

“You make me not confident.”

“Why don’t I have a body like that?”

Another body positivity trend that did not do what it intended to do was the “bodies that look like this” trend back in December of 2020. Girls created videos showing their bodies looking toned and thin. They would then show how their bodies looked when they would contort their bodies in unnatural ways- exaggeratedly hunched over, twisted and bent over. These unnatural poses created rolls on their bellies or showed the cellulite on their thighs. Again, the

issue with this trend was that it was all skinny girls doing it and basically forcing these imperfections to show. However, for larger girls, their bodies do not need to be forced to show rolls or cellulite, it just simply shows on them 24/7. Eventually, the pop singer Lizzo participated in the trend and seemed to be a bit more meaningful due to her body type. Explaining why her video was more meaningful, TikToker @jordxn.simone stated that this trend “still subscribes to the notion that there are perfect and imperfect bodies. Long story short, skinny people are talking about acceptance, fat people are talking about liberation.”

Smaller girls forcing their imperfections to show took away from the meaning behind the trend and made the focus on them rather than body types it was intended for. TikTok users pointed out that when “fat girls” created these types of videos, they were flagged for “violating community guidelines” and would get their video taken down. There is a double standard within body positivity trends and it causes them to make people feel poorly about themselves. Some comments from these videos include:

“This doesn’t help me.”

“Was this supposed to make me feel better?”

“If this did anything at all it just made me feel worse about myself thank you.”

“She went from skinny to skinny. So brave.”

“Yea my insecurities just grew 100%”

“Oh wah wah. Whatever. This trend wasn't made for you.”

These body positivity trends are really just paradoxes. The purpose of body positivity is to spread positivity to *all* body types; however, that is not what these trends do. Instead they contradict themselves by gearing only towards girls with hourglass figures and not a single roll

of fat on their bodies. This contradictory message does not give confidence to people of all body types, but instead it does the opposite.

Another kind of video that girls have been creating are ones of them saying how much they hate their bodies and picking apart their imperfections. Not only is this detrimental to themselves, but also to the girls who are seeing it on their FYP. Allow me to illustrate the situation. A girl creating a self hatred video (person A) oftentimes sees something completely different in the mirror than what an outside viewer sees (person B). To person B, person A may have their ideal or 'dream body.' By person A saying they hate the way they look, they are just making person B feel horrible about themselves. While some may say these girls are 'seeking attention' they clearly have insecurities just like other girls which makes the viewers more insecure and invalidates the insecurities of the creator. It is a never ending cycle of making others and themselves insecure and having body image issues.

Comments found under these style TikToks include:

"The things I would do to look like this, you're gorgeous."

"I would never hate the way I looked if I looked like you."

"I wish I looked like you."

"I wanna look like you so badly I'm crying."

"Please, I would literally kill to look like you. How could you hate the way you look?"

In July of 2020, NBC News spoke with seven women who were in their teens and 20s about the effects TikTok has had on their mental health. The women explained that the content they were constantly seeing on the app, "pushed them to fixate more on their diets and exercise regimens to a dangerous extent." One of the women said she was repeatedly seeing videos called "thinspo" aka thin inspiration. Another said, "When I initially downloaded TikTok, I saw a lot of

really, really negative body image videos.” Seeing this type of content every single day directly affected their mental health and everyday habits in a negative way (Kaufman, 2020).

Mental health from a creator’s perspective

Being on the creator side of TikTok is much different than just being a viewer. As a creator, you are putting yourself out there for judgement and due to TikTok’s more conversational tone, people feel more comfortable leaving extremely hateful comments or making hurtful duets.

For example, a girl took part in the “I hate the way I look” trend with a video of herself looking at her body in the camera and crying. Another girl who was clearly confident with herself stitched the video with an image of herself doing a seductive pose with the caption “sucks for you.” This example just goes to show how cruel and malicious some TikTok users can truly be.

We are able to see the disheartening truth about TikTok’s effect on creators in the Hulu original, *The D’amelio Show*. This is a reality television show about the D’amelio family of which the two daughters, Charli and Dixie, are famous TikTok creators. The two sisters are ripped apart in their comment sections every single day. In the show, Charli opens up about how TikTok led her to acquiring an eating disorder. She would receive comments saying that she is fat so she stopped eating and would lose weight. Then she would receive comments saying she is too skinny, which made her eat more and it was a repeating cycle of gaining and losing weight with the comments following it. Charli was only fifteen years old when she started to gain followers on TikTok and two years later she now has *130 million followers*. Having this abundance of people watching and critiquing her at such a young age can certainly cripple one’s

mental health. In the show we see Charli having to take a break from her social media to avoid seeing the thousands of destructive comments she receives on a daily basis.

The show also has a heartbreaking scene where we see the effects of this platform take its toll on Dixie. The comment section under Dixie's videos are constantly people telling her she looks "musty," she's only famous because of her sister, and she is a horrible singer. On the show, Dixie breaks down sobbing because of these hateful comments. As I'm sure many would agree, this was a difficult scene to watch as it was a very vulnerable moment for Dixie where we saw genuine hurt and emotions caused by her TikTok comments. Although it was hard to watch, I think it was really important and powerful to include this scene in the show because these kinds of behind the scene moments are not often seen by creators' viewers.

Creating and posting content on TikTok is a vulnerable position to be in because you are putting yourself out there for anyone to critique you. Something creators often experience are viewers pointing out an imperfection they had and commenting on it. These imperfections are often things that the person has never even noticed about themselves. Now since that viewer had to point this flaw out, the creator has a new insecurity about themselves.

Sixteen year old actress and social media star, Sissy Sheridan, commented on the effects TikTok has had on her body image. As someone who is often referred to as being "body goals" she also has received much criticism of her body. She tweeted out, "I liked my body before I downloaded TikTok." This tweet illustrates the direct effects TikTok has on young women.

Why we still use TikTok knowing its harmful effects

Personally, my mental health has been directly affected by TikTok as a viewer. Ever since becoming an avid user of the app, I have experienced a serious decline in my own mental health

when it comes to body image. There was a time where my For You Page (FYP) was filled with gym content because I was going to the gym everyday and was liking a lot of gym posts to save the workouts. I thought I was doing myself a favor by learning new workout routines, but in the process of finding them, I was comparing myself to the girls in the videos who were in immaculate shape. This made me blind to the progress I was making and caused me to think down upon myself. Eventually I became aware of this, yet I continued to consume the same content despite its negative effects on me.

Despite all of the very clear negative and harmful effects TikTok has on young adult's body image, they still continue utilizing the app. This is where the Uses and Gratifications Theory comes into play. Regardless of the negativities that come from scrolling through the short videos, it still has the many motivations of entertainment, socialization, information seeking, convenience, status and personal identity. For many people, their entire FYP is not entirely made up of these harmful videos, so the ones in between are what make it worth continuing to use. TikTok is an extremely convenient source of information, entertainment and socialization. Growing in status leads to a monetary income, which is most likely what keeps larger users still creating content.

As we know from the Uses and Gratification Theory, the process of choosing a piece of media is goal oriented to fulfill a person's personal needs. Due to TikTok's multitude of gratifications it provides, it is an easy choice to fulfill their needs.

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