

# Adding Value in the Information Age: Uses and Gratifications of Sites on the World Wide Web

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*This study draws on the uses and gratifications perspective in mass communication research to examine the audience experience associated with websites. Research participants viewed five commercial websites and evaluated them using 80 rating scale items. The results show similarities to the types of uses and gratifications reported in studies of other media. New dimensions called personal involvement and continuing relationship were identified and found to be important factors when examining audience reactions to websites. The study also established the importance of website organizational concepts and considerations of design efficiency in the development of websites that attract repeat visits. J BUSN RES 1998. 41:187-194 © 1998 Elsevier Science Inc.*

**I**ncreasing numbers of businesses are investing in the development and management of online resources directed to consumers. Similarly, consumer use of online services and information resources is increasing rapidly. Indeed, the World Wide Web (WWW) is perhaps the most rapidly developing new medium in history. The rate of growth of the online world is perhaps best documented by Mark Lottor's survey of host computers connected to the Internet (Lottor, 1996). This number almost doubled from 4.8 million in January of 1995 to 9.5 million in January of 1996. It seems likely that each host computer would have at least one user, with some having many more.

Growing business interest in the WWW is indicated by the commercial value of frequently visited Web locations. For example, one website claims to provide advertisers with as many as 250,000 potential visitors each week and charges \$7,500 per week for banners (clickable links back to an adver-

tiser's own website) positioned on its website pages (Welz, 1995). One popular site on America Online asks \$400,000 a year for advertising positions on a home page reported to deliver 250,000 unique visitors each month (Hodges, 1996).

Not surprisingly, there is much discussion of how to audit and verify the consumer traffic through websites. To justify the investments businesses are making in this new medium, there is a need to relate the charges for advertising space, or banners, and the costs of operating the advertisers' own websites to the numbers of consumers visiting websites. The Audit Bureau of Circulations, the leader in certifying the credibility of print media circulation reports, Nielson Media Research, and Internet Profiles Corporation are among the organizations that have developed procedures to provide third-party verification of website traffic (Fitzgerald, 1996). However, the growth of advertising activity on the WWW has been slower than some expected, with most of the advertising revenue concentrated on as few as 10 large commercial websites (Resnick, 1996).

Advertisers are faced with a quandary, finding that websites cannot be evaluated in quite the same manner as print media, radio, or television. The capacity to not only provide information to website visitors but also to immediately exchange information with visitors on an individualized basis is an entirely new communication approach. The WWW is at once a mass medium and interpersonal communication. This new medium is also showing rapidly advancing capabilities to present information and entertainment with digital images, sound, and video.

But, what is the communications value of this online world? The increasing complexity of websites with their on-demand features and potential for personal response to individual visitors call for more than standardized measures of audience size. Which sources on the WWW are most attractive and useful to consumers? More importantly, which ones become

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part of the media cluster individuals come to rely upon for information, news, and entertainment?

The language used to describe usage of WWW—terms like browsing and surfing—suggests underlying motives associated with casual sampling of information. In a similar vein, surveys of the online audience show people reporting a substantial amount of exploratory behavior. For example, the recent American Internet User survey by Find/SVP found “nearly 60% of web users indicated they visit fewer than 10 sites on a regular basis, at least once a month or more” (Find/SVP, 1996). Other surveys of WWW audience members (or website visitors) also suggest current online users are exhibiting a substantial amount of exploratory behavior. One survey of WWW users late in 1994 found the most widely reported uses involved browsing (27%) and entertainment (22%). The remaining uses were closely divided among education, work, and academics (Pitkow and Recker, 1994). A Yankelovich Partners survey showed work to be the leading reported use of the WWW (29%) with the other uses divided among activities described as entertainment, secondary information, news, learning and exploring, and surfing (Yankelovich Partners, 1995, p. 8).

Consumers and businesses alike are struggling to find the best ways to use the online world. The growth rate of the Web and related online services leads one to think this is rapidly becoming a significant medium that is at once mass and individual. But, the question is can this medium have the impact of the *Wall Street Journal*, the reach of the Super Bowl, or will it be the electronic equivalent of junk mail? Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of website visitors concerning the experience of using a selection of commercial websites. In so doing, the study provides an early indication of the nature of the communication value being found by audience members when they visit commercial websites.

## Uses and Gratifications Perspective

The exploratory behavior suggested by browsing and surfing is a common form of mass media use (Bogart, 1986). Moreover, many people use a medium or specific media content merely because they just happen to encounter it (Bogart, 1965). People purchase magazines they happen to see at checkout counters, and they may click across cable channels while eating dinner. Similarly, they may also detour to surf through websites after checking their e-mail or follow an unexpected lead that develops when using a WWW search engine. But what conditions are associated with continuing use of a medium, once encountered?

One approach to answering such questions is offered by the area of mass communication research known as the uses and gratifications perspective. This approach arose out of the functionalist perspective on mass media first articulated during the 1940s in research concerning the effects of radio

programs on members of the listening audience. Psychologist and mass media researcher Herta Herzog described the functionalist perspective as focusing on the question of the satisfactions people say they derive from using a particular mass medium (Herzog, 1944). It is such self-reported perceptions and motivations that may give researchers insight concerning the factors that attract continuing audiences to specific mass media. Herzog used the term gratifications to describe the specific types or dimensions of satisfaction reported by continuing audience members for daytime radio programs. For example, in an early study of audience reactions to radio quiz programs, Paul Lazarsfeld identified four audience member gratifications: a sense of competitive self-esteem was reported by those who successfully answered the questions as though they were contestants, many saw the quiz answers as serving an educational function by providing “diversified information,” a sense of self-rating gave listeners a measure of the knowledge each possessed, and sporting appeal came from listener attempt at predicting the winning contestants (Lazarsfeld, 1940).

Subsequently, mass communication researchers have used the functionalist, or gratifications, perspective in research concerning continuing use of various mass media, particularly television (Rubin, 1994). This approach has come to be known as the uses and gratifications perspective, wherein researchers focus on audience member motivation and behavior. For example, certain kinds of television programs have been shown to be related to various human needs, including information acquisition, escape, emotional release, companionship, reality exploration, and value reinforcement (Rubin, 1994). Importantly, this approach assumes audience members actively use mass media to fulfill specific needs. They are seen as active gratification seekers interacting with the media as opposed to passive recipients of media content (Williams, Phillips, and Lum, 1987). Moreover, the concepts and perspectives of uses and gratifications research are particularly useful in explaining continuing use of a medium (McGuire, 1974, p. 170). Whereas initial use of a medium may result from accidental exposure, curiosity about new things, or participation in a fad, continuing use of a medium would seem likely to dissipate in the absence of audience rewards for continued reading, listening, or viewing.

## Applications to New Media

The uses and gratifications perspective has been successfully applied to a range of new media and related technologies. As a way to explore contrasting views of the effects of computer-mediated communication (CMC), Rafaeli (1986) examined audience member reports regarding their use of a university computer bulletin board. One hypothesis was that CMC leads to loneliness and isolation, whereas the contrasting hypothesis was that CMC leads to interaction and the development of relationships. Rafaeli found that bulletin boards can serve large

audiences across a diverse set of topics, thereby serving as mass media. The bulletin board users reported recreation, entertainment, and diversion as the primary motivation for use, followed by learning what others think and controversial content and by communication with people who matter to me and the community. Rafaeli also observed that although the content of the bulletin board was skewed toward the nonutilitarian, the factual or informative messages were skipped the least, indicating strong interest in factual or informative messages. This study revealed a wide range of uses and gratifications which may be associated with CMC and its potential for personal communication.

Donohew, Palmgreen, and Rayburn (1987) examined how the need for activation interacts with social and psychological factors to affect media uses and gratifications sought by cable television audiences. They used Q-analysis to construct a typology of cable television viewer groups based on audience member ratings of scalar items representing a range of uses and gratifications. Their study identified four audience groups and indicated numerous personal characteristics (such as occupation and interests) are related to media usage and consumption. The four groups were shown to differ in the need for activation and the manner in which this need manifested itself in uses and gratifications sought from television program content. Importantly, this study of a cable television audience revealed that there is a media gratification associated with a need for exploratory activity. Although cable television is not a new medium at this point in time, the emergence of a media gratification associated with exploratory activity appears particularly relevant in the context of the WWW.

In an article reviewing uses and gratifications research, Swanson (1987) discussed the need to understand the role of message content. He also indicated audience members bring their own perceptions to media content, and various audience members may seek and find different uses and gratifications in the same medium or media content. His point seems particularly applicable to the WWW, with its growing number of websites and the diversity of content areas.

Walker and Bellamy (1991) related use of TV remote control devices (RCDs) to audience member interest in types of program content. They found the uses and gratifications of RCDs to be both related to the avoidance of content and reflective of the desire for more. In particular, they showed audience members to be active, searching for and selecting personal menus of program and commercial content. These factors appear to relate directly to the browsing behavior noted in connection with the WWW.

Kuehn (1994) proposed uses and gratifications as a useful perspective in studying computer-aided instructional (CAI) settings. He called attention to the interactive capability of CMC and posed uses and gratifications including convenience, diversion, relationship development, and intellectual appeal. Importantly, he also suggested that a group of gratification statements be used as rating scales to evaluate CAI programs.

The group of scales could then be reduced by factor analysis and the factors compared to the themes found in the uses and gratifications literature.

Kuehn's proposed approach is similar to that described by Plummer (1971) for application to television commercials. Plummer used adjectives and descriptive statements to develop a bank of rating scales for the evaluation of television commercials. Factor analysis of audience ratings for a substantial number of television commercials revealed seven consistent dimensions. The leading dimension was called entertainment or stimulation. This was followed by dimensions called irritation, familiarity, empathy or gratifying involvement, confusion, informativeness or personal relevance, and brand reinforcement. The dimensions called entertainment or stimulation, irritation, involvement, and informativeness bear a clear similarity to the dimensions found in the previously discussed uses and gratifications research.

Schlenger (1979) described a related study of television commercials that provided details concerning a bank of 49 adjectives and descriptive statements and the factor structures associated with a substantial group of commercials. The factor analysis results were similar to those reported by Plummer, suggesting consistency in the uses and gratifications themes or dimensions associated with television commercials. The leading dimension was entertainment, followed by confusion, relevant news, brand reinforcement, empathy, familiarity, and alienation or irritation.

## Uses and Gratifications Applied to the Web

As previously described, WWW survey information suggests much of the current activity on the WWW involves exploratory behavior. This is consistent with the uses and gratifications literature, which indicates that a primary use of computer-mediated forms of communication involves entertainment and exploration. The WWW offers a rich CMC environment in which audience members can contact many thousands of sources, find information presented in a wide range of formats from simple text to animation to live video, and can interact with many of the sources they contact.

Accordingly, we expected to find audience members reporting a complex assortment of uses and gratifications. And, after the previous research, we expected entertainment or stimulation to dominate, followed variously by such dimensions as information, involvement with others, personal involvement or relevance, and confusion.

## Approach

During July, 1995 a group of 31 participants were selected so that the group would reasonably represent the adult user base of the WWW at the time of the study. Of the group, 70% were experienced users of the WWW. The remainder

were familiar with websites but first-time users of a graphic web browser. All participants were college graduates. The average age was 30. The sample was evenly divided between men and women. This overrepresented women at the time of the study, but anticipated a change in the composition of the web audience.

Five websites were selected because they (1) represented major brands well-known to consumers, (2) received favorable reviews in the trade and popular press, and (3) represented a diverse range of creative approaches and industries. The five were: a telecommunications company offering information about its products and communication services, a television network promoting its programs and schedule, a luxury-oriented manufacturer of packaged candy with information about the history of its product category, a packaged and canned food company with wide distribution presenting information about its national heritage, and a large manufacturer of athletic shoes and sportswear with information about sports and public issues.

Participants browsed the sites individually using the Netscape browser (version 1.0 was current at that time) and Macintosh II computers with 14-inch color monitors. Each participant was asked to devote at least an hour during which he or she would examine all five websites. Each was assigned a specific sequence for visiting the five websites, and they were allowed to follow their own interests as they explored the pages within each website. The participants were told to let their own level of interest guide them in deciding how much time to spend viewing each website. When each felt ready to move on to another, he or she stopped to evaluate the present site with a questionnaire consisting of 80 scalar items. All participants spent at least an hour with one person taking two and a half hours. The average time for completing the entire task was an hour and a half.

The scalar items represented a wide range of evaluative statements concerning possible reactions to the experience of examining the websites. These items were derived from previous uses and gratifications studies as well as from a pretest series of interviews with frequent users of the WWW. Williams, Phillips, and Lum (1987) proposed several themes that suggest new dimensions of Web-related uses and gratifications: expanded choice, special qualities of interactivity, personalness, and more individualistic gratifications. Each of these dimensions was used to generate scalar items. McGuire (1974) also outlined a typology of the dimensions, or themes, that were useful for generating new items. A variety of items presented in Schlinger (1979) was also adapted for the purposes of this study. The rating scales consisted of 6 points with the lowest indicating strong disagreement and the highest strong agreement.

## Data Reduction

Data reduction began with factor analysis to identify the associations among the scalar items for each of the five websites.

This was an exploratory study, and it was felt that factor analysis would be useful in revealing the range of different uses and gratifications that audience members may associate with the websites examined in the study. The sample size may be considered small, but the results are nevertheless interpretable in terms of their fit with previous uses and gratifications studies and viewer reward profile studies of television commercials.

The ratings for the five websites were factor analyzed separately with varimax rotation and a 1.0 cutoff for the eigenvalues. Following the "break-in-the-roots" method described by Gorsuch (1974), it was determined that those factors showing contributions to the total variance of 5% or larger would be included in the subsequent analysis. The specific scalar items correlated with each factor meeting the 5% criterion were then examined and compared across the five websites to identify the concepts or themes associated with the factors. Once identified, these conceptual areas were compared with those identified in previous uses and gratifications research. The identified conceptual areas, or factors, were also used to organize a comparison of the audience impressions of the five websites. This was done by contrasting the mean scores of the websites on the scalar items most representative of the factors.

## Factor Analysis Results

Seventeen factors across the five websites met the 5% criterion for inclusion in the analysis. Table 1 presents the total variance explained by each factor, the scalar item with the highest correlation on the factor, and gives a name to each factor that reflects the group of scalar items most highly correlated with each factor. For example, the first factor for the telecommunications company accounted for 52% of the total variance, the highest loading item was "I liked the website because it was personal" (0.92), and that item along with the others with similarly high loadings on that factor could be described as indicating a theme we called personal involvement.

The factors accounting for the largest proportion of the total variance were associated with the themes called entertainment value, personal involvement, and personal relevance. These were retained as separate factors for the subsequent comparison of the five websites. To help organize the comparisons, certain of the remaining factors were placed in groups. The factors useful information and involvement with information were sufficiently similar to allow them to be grouped together with a theme called information involvement. In a similar fashion, simplicity of organization, clarity of language, difficulty understanding, and confusing were grouped together under a theme called clarity of purpose. In this way, the 17 factors listed in Table 1 were organized into nine groups.

## Comparison of the Five Websites

Table 2 shows the nine groups of factors and 16 scalar items that were used to compare the websites. As explained in the

**Table 1.** Leading Factors for Each Website

Variance Explained	Item	Loading	Factor Name
Telecommunications company			
Factor 1. (52%)	"I liked the website because it was personal."	(0.92)	Personal involvement.
Factor 2. (9%)	"The website was controversial."	(0.65)	Controversy.
Factor 3. (7%)	"New information to me."	(0.47)	Useful information.
Factor 4. (5%)	"I know the sponsor is reliable."	(-0.62)	Credibility.
Television network			
Factor 1. (48%)	"The website was clever and entertaining."	(0.89)	Entertainment value.
Factor 2. (8%)	"The website made exaggerated claims."	(0.63)	Controversy.
Factor 3. (6%)	"I know the sponsor is reliable."	(0.56)	Credibility.
Luxury candy			
Factor 1. (41%)	"Worth remembering."	(0.91)	Personal relevance.
Factor 2. (11%)	"Confusing."	(0.86)	Simplicity of organization.
Factor 3. (7%)	"Easy to read."	(0.89)	Clarity of language.
Packaged and canned food company			
Factor 1. (28%)	"Imaginative."	(0.93)	Entertainment value.
Factor 2. (14%)	"Informative."	(0.87)	Involvement with information.
Factor 3. (14%)	"I was too busy trying to figure things out."	(0.84)	Difficulty understanding.
Factor 4. (6%)	"I want to visit the website again."	(0.89)	Desire for relationship.
Manufacturer of athletic shoes and sportswear			
Factor 1. (40%)	"Exciting."	(0.92)	Entertainment value.
Factor 2. (11%)	"It was distracting—trying to figure out the website."	(0.92)	Complexity.
Factor 3. (6%)	"I will definitely buy products from this company."	(0.86)	Purchase interest.

**Table 2.** Comparison of Mean Scores across Five Websites

	(T)	(N)	(C)	(F)	(A)	F-Test <sup>a</sup>
Entertainment value						
The website was clever and entertaining.	3.6	4.2	3.7	5.1	3.1	0.0001
Imaginative.	3.8	4.0	3.8	4.8	3.3	0.0001
Exciting.	3.5	4.1	3.6	4.5	3.3	0.0001
Personal involvement						
I liked the website because it was personal.	3.3	3.7	3.5	4.6	2.8	0.0001
Personal relevance						
Worth remembering.	3.6	4.4	4.0	5.0	3.1	0.0001
Information involvement						
New information to me.	4.2	4.4	4.4	4.1	3.8	0.0816
Informative.	4.2	4.5	4.4	4.7	3.9	0.0096
Clarity of purpose						
Confusing.	2.7	2.3	2.0	2.1	3.2	0.0001
It was distracting.	2.6	2.2	2.1	2.1	3.4	0.0001
I was too busy trying to figure things out.	2.7	2.1	2.2	1.9	3.1	0.0001
Easy to read.	4.1	4.1	4.7	4.8	3.8	0.0001
Controversy						
The website was controversial.	2.0	2.1	1.8	1.8	2.6	0.0001
The website made exaggerated claims.	2.7	2.6	2.4	2.4	2.7	0.0221
Credibility						
I know the sponsor is reliable.	4.4	4.2	4.2	4.2	4.3	0.5949
Continuing relationship						
I want to visit the website again.	3.4	4.6	3.7	4.8	2.8	0.0001
Purchase interest						
I will definitely buy products from the company.	3.5	3.3	3.7	4.3	3.1	0.0001

<sup>a</sup>Probability levels from ANOVA for repeated measures. Within rows, comparisons of less than 1.0 are generally not significant at the 95% level using Fisher's test for pairwise comparisons.

T = telecommunications company; N = television network; C = candy company; F = packaged food company; A = athletic shoe and sportswear company.

previous section, these were the individual items most highly correlated with each one of the factors retained in the analysis. Higher scores indicate increasing levels of agreement. Mean values near the scale mid-point of 3.5 indicate neutrality on the scales which ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6). ANOVA for repeated measures showed there were significant across-row comparisons (at the 95% confidence level or better) for all items but "new information" and "reliable sponsor." Fisher's test for pairwise comparisons was used to examine the differences among the means in the rows showing significant differences. Within row differences of 1.0 or larger are significant to at least the 95% level of confidence.

In an overall sense, the telecommunications website (T) was seen as informative and credible, the television network website (N) was entertaining and informative, the candy manufacturer (C) was seen as informative, the packaged food manufacturer (F) performed well on all of the dimensions, and the website of the athletic shoe company (A) showed consistently low mean scores.

## Discussion Concerning Uses and Gratifications Perspective

As in the previous uses and gratifications studies, factors associated with entertainment value, personal relevance, and information involvement accounted for the largest proportion of the total variance. Themes associated with clarity of purpose (or confusion), controversy, and credibility were also seen in the previously described viewer reward studies involving consumer responses to television advertising. This consistency with themes from previous uses and gratifications studies gave the researchers another source of confidence that, despite the small sample size, the findings would be revealing with respect to visitor perceptions of sites on the WWW.

The emergent factors in this study appear to be related to personal involvement and continuing relationship. Personal involvement accounted for the largest amount of the variance in the ratings for the telecommunications company website, and served as one of the most differentiating dimensions in the contrasts among the five websites. Mean values for the scalar item representing personal involvement were highest for the packaged food website and lowest for the website of the athletic shoe and sportswear manufacturer. In spite of the impersonality sometimes attributed to CMC, the participants in this study appear to have sensed substantial variation in the personal feeling conveyed by the five websites they visited.

The new factor called continuing relationship also showed important contrasts among the websites. In particular, the ratings for the packaged food company and the television network indicate a stronger potential to attract and hold audiences. At the packaged food website, a fictional character served as hostess and the information provided was relevant to both the interests of the audience and the imagery associated with the company. Interestingly, the importance of continuing

relationship in this study is consistent with uses and gratifications research concerning audience member development of parasocial relationships with television personalities (Rubin and McHugh, 1987). It appears that websites projecting a strong sense of personality may also encourage the development of a kind of parasocial relationship with website visitors. However, a sense of personal imagery is not the only factor that may encourage the development of a continuing relationship with website visitors. At the television network website, timely and frequently updated information about program schedules and program content apparently led to greater visitor interest in repeat visits.

## Discussion Concerning Website Planning and Design

Turning to a practical perspective, the results indicate one website was clearly the winner in terms of visitor perceptions. Comparisons of mean scores on the scalar items showed the packaged food company's website to lead in entertainment value, personal involvement, and personal relevance. The site also performed well on the items associated with clarity of purpose. In terms of pay-off to the sponsor, this site was also the leader in audience member interest in continuing relationship and purchase interest. By way of contrast, the website of the athletic shoe and sportswear company was seen as least entertaining, least informative, and least involving despite what the researchers would observe was a considerable investment in website design and features.

Three broad lessons were learned, suggestive of more effective approaches in website planning and design. The first two concern the organization of information and the third concerns the use of design features for presenting information.

1. The website medium demonstrates the intersection of information and entertainment.

When the strategic purpose of a website involves providing product related information, clarity and ease of access are only part of the story involved in website planning. The responses of the research participants in this study suggest that website visitors benefit from finding information in a context that adds value in and of itself. This means an element of entertainment is important.

For example, the telecommunication company website presented information about products and services clearly grouped for market segments such as business, consumers at home, and people traveling in public spaces. Although the study participants rated this website as being informative, it was also seen as having the least clear purpose and one of the sites they were least likely to visit again. Apparently it is not enough to provide organized information. Higher levels of visitor involvement appear to come from placing information in a more idea-driven context, one that may be said to

introduce elements of entertainment and promote a context for the process of understanding and using the information.

2. Website visitors are assisted by organizational ideas that make sense in terms of the strategic purpose of the website.

The initial page, or home page, of a website serves much the same function as the table of contents of a magazine or the program schedule of a television network. This page essentially helps the website visitor understand the "way in" to the information he or she is seeking. This orienting page can merely take the form of a descriptive list, or it can be something more—an idea with deeper meaning.

The initial page of the packaged food website introduced the visitor to a playful perceptual world based upon the ethnic origins and heritage of the food. The fictional character served as the website hostess, welcoming visitors and guiding them to various areas of related information and entertainment offered by the website. Accordingly, all the elements of the website had a clear organizational structure and the information resources worked together to create a perceptual world that gave a sense of ethnic authenticity to the website. As such this website operated in manner consistent with its promotional purpose, giving meaning to the brand and its related products, and offering devices such as recipes and coupons that promoted product use.

The website of the athletic shoe and sportswear manufacturer also attempted to create a perceptual world. In this case, the overall theme or idea for the website was based on the company's advertising slogan at the time. The website also used the puzzle concept as an organizational metaphor. However, the pieces of the puzzle did not build into a whole or completed puzzle that represented the advertising idea. The visitor easily lost track of where to go next and how the parts connected to give the website a sense of overall meaning. This website also appeared to lack a clear strategic purpose that would have helped give meaning to its planning and design.

3. Website visitors are assisted by efficiently executed design features.

The extent to which graphic and photographic elements are used on a website page translate directly into the amount of time needed to download the page into a website visitor's computer. If website visitors must expend effort coping with elaborate design elements or waiting for page design features to download, then it appears website planners should be certain to offer an information or entertainment value commensurate with the waiting time.

For example, the packaged food website relied on a minimum of graphic elements, standard type faces, and plain backgrounds. In contrast, the athletic shoe and sportswear website used variations in type face styles, and placed text over background patterns and colors that challenged the vision of the website visitor. Even granting a somewhat younger intended

audience for this website, the level of reading difficulty introduced by the design of this website was daunting. Similarly, this website also included substantial graphic and background elements, causing website visitors to wait unreasonable periods of time for seemingly small amounts of information.

## Conclusions

This was an exploratory study, using a small sample of website visitors and five selected websites. Nevertheless, the study indicates that many of the uses and gratifications associated with the website experience are similar to those of previous mass media examined with this theoretical perspective. Importantly, new uses and gratifications dimensions related to the interactive potential of the WWW, namely personal involvement and continuing relationship, were identified and explored.

This study calls attention to the importance of organizational ideas and considerations of efficiency in the use of website design features. In the information age, people want information. This study indicates members of the WWW audience are attracted to information that adds value in both form and substance, but that the information must reach visitors in a time period commensurate with the perceived value of the information.

The responses of the study participants also suggest computer mediation does not mean there needs to be an absence of humanity. The study participants showed a preference for the website most clearly organized on human terms. That is, the study participants responded most positively to the website that spoke in a personal voice and placed the product information in a broader and entertaining context. This context was both of interest to the audience and presented the products in an environment that deepened their meaning.

In an overall sense, information becomes a relationship on the WWW. This medium offers the potential for members of the audience to become visitors and communicators in the complete sense of both terms. That is, they can come calling at various times and can engage in the exchange of information. In this context, the potential for human qualities and continuing relationships can lead to the advancement of our understanding of the theoretical concept known as parasocial interaction.

Finally, not only do the results of this study indicate certain findings and research themes, but the approach itself leads to a diagnostic method for website planners and designers. The scalar items used in this study can serve as a multidimensional device for the evaluation of visitor reactions to the experience of any website. We have named it the website response profile.

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