

A  
CRITICAL ANALYSIS  
OF :  
“MODELING AUDIENCE  
INTERACTIVITY AS THE  
GRATIFICATION-SEEKING  
PROCESS  
IN ONLINE NEWSPAPERS”

by Chan Yun Yoo

READING CRITIQUE

GABE CHONG

8 March 2015

Echoing the USA, Roy Morgan Research reports that, while Australian print newspaper readership is tenuous, combined print/online readership has increased due principally to the significant growth in online readership (NewsGallery, 2015). Roy Morgan Research (2014) views the upward trend as being due to “increased cross-platform consumption of news content”, in particular on PCs, tablets and smartphones. As Singer (2008) observed, news aggregation can be a profitable business for the aggregators.

Brodie, Hollebeek, Juric & Ilic (2011) assert that it is now strategically **imperative** for newspaper businesses to focus on *audience engagement*, specifically through “co-creating interactive customer experience and value.” This refers not only to the importance of engagement through interactivity, but also that the online experience must be developed bilaterally with readers. John Battelle, entrepreneur, author and co-founder of Federated Media Publishing and the annual Web 2.0 Summit, reinforces this view stating:



*“The experience that a publication creates for its audience is the very essence of that publication's **brand** - and without deep engagement, that publication's brand will be weak. A good publication is a convener and an arbiter - it expresses a core narrative that becomes a **badge of sorts** for its readership.”* (John Battelle, 2015).

Battelle's perspective is applicable to an online newspaper which has to engage and immerse its audience by facilitating audience interactivity. In a competitive environment, newspapers that do not connect with their readers will face loss of readership and commercial detriment.

Given this scenario, research into audiences and their respective engagement - particularly through interactive features and content – is exceedingly important and invaluable. Research studies by scholars such as Yoo (2011) are significant and provide rich insight into audience interactivity and gratification derived from that interactivity. While based on an online newspaper in a medium-sized US city, Yoo's findings may – broadly and with qualification – be applicable to other newspapers and organisations including book and magazine publishers, online blogs, government agencies and educational institutions.

Along with scholars like LaRose & Eastin (2004), Quan-Haase & Young (2014) assert that the *Uses and Gratifications* (U&G) approach continues to be relevant to the field of *internet* studies. Tables 1 and 2

in Yoo’s research share similarities to Quan-Haase & Young’s study in 2010 into gratifications obtained from Facebook and Instant Messaging. The four primary motives – *information seeking*, *socialisation*, *entertainment* and *pastime* – were shown to be valid. Additionally, three of these motives had a direct impact upon *human* and *medium* interactivity, with *socialisation*, naturally, affected only by *human* interactivity (Yoo, 2011).

Significantly, Yoo’s effervescent survey distinguishes between *Gratification Sought* (GS) and *Gratification Obtained* (GO). This highlights *actual* experienced gratifications, or otherwise, during the online user experience and after. This is crucial. After all, how can the newspaper effectively tailor their user interface and interactive features to satisfy readers (GO), without first understanding the readers’ sought motives (GS)? Recognising the differentiations minimises potential shortcomings from perceptions or erroneous conclusions. Additionally, Price, Leong & Ryan (2005) concluded that identifying the way motivations (GS) differ contingent upon user characteristics is essential and requisite for targeting particular segments of the audience. For instance, targeting male and female sub-audiences differ. Price et al. (2005) suggest, for example, that a website targeting females may incorporate features addressing “the **altruistic** factor”, e.g. allowing readers to assist others through support, advice or discussion on forums.

In the context of an online newspaper, Singer (2008) argues that the ‘*Where*’ is the *Internet* and ‘*When*’ is “in a word, ‘*now*’.” In this light, the findings of the research, which Yoo claims is consistent with earlier surveys (Chung & Yoo, 2008), would have assisted the online newspaper’s management in understanding their readers [customers – the ‘*Who*’], and their online behaviour, activities and attitudes on the website [the ‘*What*’, ‘*How*’ and ‘*Why*’].



Chan Yun Yoo  
(University of Kentucky, 2010)

Central to Yoo’s (2011) research were these questions: “*Why and how do people use various interactive features in an online newspaper?*” and “*Why is it important to enhance interactivity during their use of an online newspaper?*” Without Yoo’s research – which shows a positive relationship between GS and GO – the newspaper would be unaware that their readers have a good appreciation “of *what* can be achieved in the... online newspaper.” Additionally they would have been unclear as to *how* much repeat visitation is occurring. This is crucial and meaningful data for informed decision-making by the newspaper; not to mention data on the number of ‘hits’ and therefore the potential for generating revenue through advertising and ancillary products.

In addition, such research should also provide the newspaper’s management with guidance on *where* to allocate internal resources to serve the needs of the readership (Sage Publications, n.d.) and, from a business strategy viewpoint, *how* to mitigate **risk** (Kaplan & Mikes, 2012). Research is vital for other reasons including:

- Identifying target audience, sub-audiences and market opportunities
- Differentiating between *perceived* and *actual* audience
- Determining how audience engagement can be enhanced
- Understanding *perceived* and *actual* interactivity, and effectiveness of interactivity features
- Audience revisitation
- Enabling formulation of business strategies towards audience marketing and service, and educating audience that online newspapers offer more than just news.



Reiterating, research is important as it assists the online newspaper understand its audience’s characteristics; their expectations, gratifications sought and obtained; and GS and GO influences on interactivity and repeat visitations.

The research by Yoo (2011), and its contribution to the overall audience interactivity and gratification (GS & GO) backdrop, is indisputable. Yoo’s findings are **valid**. However, useful as they are, the findings are not definitive or complete. Yoo accepts that his research has limitations, most notably the following:

- the findings may not be truly representative of the general demographic;
- inaccuracies of *actual* audience interactivity derived from self-reporting; and
- deficiencies of the website in functionality and aesthetics.

It should be noted also that Yoo recommends examining the results against random samples from the general population or general internet users. This should be revised from ‘or’ to ‘**and**’, if an

accurate representation of the potential audience is desired. The U&G approach is effectively a questionnaire survey (Schroeder, Drotner, Kline, & Murray, 2003, p.38) and Yoo recognises that its results cannot be applied without qualification or further interpretation.

There is little evidence in the article that comprehensive demographic data was collected. Yoo (2011) simply states that demographic information was sought from respondents. Not only is there no indication of the degree and type of demographic data requested, there are no grounds to assume that all respondents had even *entered* the requested data completely. Was the full spectrum of socio-cultural characteristics collected, e.g. education, occupation and income, marital status, family circumstances and immigration status? Neither was there any reference to compiling **ethnological** data, nor data associated with **personality** – *types, attributes and traits* [*‘who’*], which is essential for personality-targeted user interface and interactivity design (Nov, Arazy, Lopez, & Brusilovsky, 2013).

Even if complete demographic data was collected, 352 respondents is unequivocally a small sample. Compounding matters, it is (a) a sample of existing readers only and (b) of readers who were **willing** to participate in the survey. Therefore, not only does Yoo’s research present, potentially, an inaccurate image of the general population, it neglects two significant groups of people [*‘Who’*]:



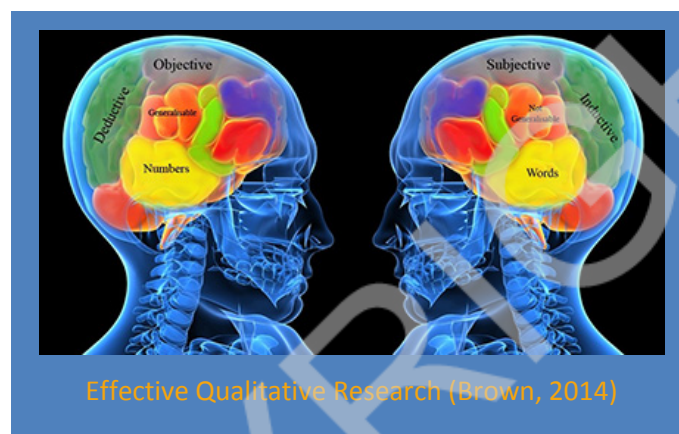
- existing readers **who** are reluctant to undertake online surveys; and
- potential readers **who** are not currently part of the newspaper’s readership.

With the former, measurement errors may result where surveys are associated with **reluctance** on the part of users to participate [*‘Why’*], with *motivation* is cited as a possible cause for the “relationship between reluctance and measurement error.” (Kaminska, McCutcheon & Billiet, 2010). Whether these survey-reluctant readers are more sensitive to the website’s interactive features is therefore a reasonable question.

Failing to measure *potential* readers is ignoring a significant part of the market, one which can be financially lucrative for the newspaper. This amounts to missing an opportunity to **create a new market** [*‘Who’*, *‘What’* & *‘How’*] and ignoring social and business responsibilities (Time, 2015). Some *potential* readers may not even be aware of the newspaper or its online presence.

Furthermore, the respondents showed a median age of 34 years. It is probable that GS and GO are different for young single adults and married senior retirees. As applicable as it may be for the city’s adult population in the mid-30s, the research is therefore an assumption for the rest of the demographic. The USA and Australia’s current median age is similar at 37 years but Japan is markedly different at 12 years older (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2014; Statista, 2015) [*Who*]. This highlights the need to account for such factors when conducting and applying research findings.

The research by Yoo (2011), tenably effective in terms of cost and time, has arguably a narrowed focus and, as a result, provides only a **partial** view of the complex real-world market.

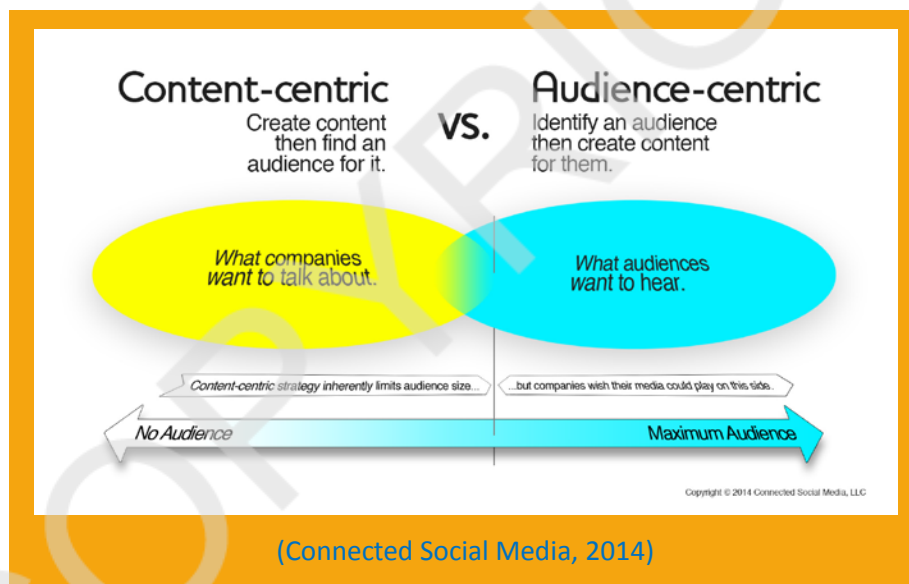


Yoo (2011) concedes that the idiosyncrasies of individual respondents may produce differences in interactivity measures, which is a view maintained by Ruggiero (2000). Yoo continues, “research should measure respondents’ actual interactivity... by monitoring their behaviours.” Clearly this suggests that qualitative collection of data is not just desirable but **necessary**. This is a perspective shared by Anthony (2009) who argues that while quantitative research is useful, “it’s dangerous to assume there is any single ‘best’ market research technique.” Anthony contends that numbers can be **misleading**, inducing false confidence and obscuring real opportunities. Too frequently, organisations default to quantitative research with the misguided notion that “there is safety in numbers.” (Qualtrics, 2010).

Ruggiero (2000) shares this view, stating that focusing on individuals and their choices without any consideration given to the context of media use is flawed. Inevitably, choices are influenced by peer pressure, social norms and trends [*Why*]. Qualitative research into user behaviour would have provided the **reasons** as to *why* choices were made and the circumstances [*What*] influencing those choices. Overlooking *context of use* produces a narrow focus thereby “making it difficult to examine the societal implications of media use.” (Ruggiero, 2000).

Even accounting for the limitations outlined by Yoo, the findings merely touch the surface of a deeper, more complex audience backdrop. For the online newspaper, qualitative answers to the following sample questions will provide a more complete result:

- **How** do the readers feel about types of content?
- **What** types of content are appealing and preferred?
- Do readers prefer *here's-what-happened-today* or more in-depth content, and **why**?
- Do readers desire to contribute, in **what** way, **how**, **how** often and **when**?
- **When** should content be provided in the audience's life cycle? (Singer, 2008).
- Does the website and interactive features demonstrate good **usability** and **accessibility**?
- Are *potential* readers **resisting** the newspaper and its online features? (Conlon, 2014).
- **How** do readers see the newspaper evolving with technological advancement and **why**?
- **Where** and **how** do readers access the website? On **what** platform and **when**?



Crucially for the newspaper, the following will have significant bearing upon business strategy:

- Does a **niche market** exist for better researched, 'brand name' journalistic content? This niche presents another possible income stream, that of subscription. (Singer, 2008).
- Is **hyper-local** content of interest and, if so, **what** and **why**? This has the potential to widen and increase readership (Schaffer, 2007).
- **What** measures might be implemented to best serve existing readers and **capture prospective** readers?
- **Why** readers **chose** this online newspaper over a competitor, and **why** would *prospects* favour it ahead of the competition?



These are indispensable questions that should be addressed. “Behaviours, opinions, patterns, needs and pain points” are best documented by qualitative research (Madrigal & McClain, 2012). Without qualitative data, the online newspaper is working partially in the ‘dark’, and they will be unable to ascertain how well the internet will serve their business model. (Singer, 2008).

In conclusion, today’s audience is diverse and complex, highly selective of content and are self-producers of content. It consists of readers, ‘*citizen journalists*’ and bloggers, podcasters and videographers. It is geographically dispersed, transitory, fragmented, with media organisations having limited control upon ‘*what*’ is seen by ‘*whom*’, ‘*why*’, ‘*when*’, ‘*where*’ and ‘*how*’. Undoubtedly *power* resides with the audience, not the media organisation.

The ‘*Five Ws & H*’ are multi-faceted and, as such, an infinite number of questions can arise from any given issue. However central to an online newspaper (and its primary ‘*why*’) is its commercial viability. Inextricably linked to this business goal is the newspaper’s targeted audience. Thus media organisations cannot afford to ignore their audiences. The application and credibility of research methods are debatable, but research’s role and contribution to organisations are beyond question.

A quantitative study provides the partial ‘picture’, one side of the coin, if you like. Qualitative research is the other, complementary side. Many scholars have concluded that both methods used integrally will likely yield the most integrated, accurate and, importantly, *useful* and *meaningful* result.

Ultimately both the audience and media organisation will benefit from meaningful research.



(Qualtrics, 2010)



## REFERENCES & BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anthony, S. (2009). Harvard Business Review - *In Market Research, Use Numbers With Caution*. Retrieved 9 Feb 2015 from <https://hbr.org/2009/09/in-market-research-use>

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2012). Population by Age and Sex, Australian States and Territories. Retrieved 9 Feb 2015 from <http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3201.0>

Australian Bureau of Statistics. (2014). Population By Age And Sex, Australia, States And Territories. Retrieved 9 Feb 2015 from <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/1CD2B1952AFC5E7ACA257298000F2E76?OpenDocument>

Brodie, R.J., Hollebeek, L.D., Juric, B., Ilic, A. (2011). Customer Engagement: Conceptual Domain, Fundamental Propositions, and Implications for Research. *Journal of Service Research*. Retrieved 9 Feb 2015 from <http://jsr.sagepub.com/content/early/2011/06/21/1094670511411703>

Brown, S. (2014). Five Steps for Conducting Effective Qualitative Research [Image]. Retrieved 10 Feb 2015 from <http://uthmag.com/five-steps-conducting-effective-qualitative-research/>

Cassin, A. (2015). Module 1: Traditional Audience Theories – A Historical Perspective of Audience Conceptions. CMNS6060 - eCultures & Audiences, The University of Newcastle, Australia.

Cassin, A. (2015). Module 2: Research Methods for Audience Study – Quantative & Qualitative Approaches. CMNS6060 - eCultures & Audiences, The University of Newcastle, Australia.

Cassin, A. (2015). Module 3: Digital Media & Audience Analysis – Technological developments and new media metrics. CMNS6060 - eCultures & Audiences, The University of Newcastle, Australia.

Chung, D., & Yoo, C.Y. (2008). Audience motivations for using interactive features: Distinguishing use of different types of interactivity on an online newspaper. *Mass Communication & Society*, 11(4), 375–397.

Conlon, G. (2014). Five Ws (and an H) for Content Marketing Success. *Direct Marketing News*. Retrieved 20 Feb 2015 from <http://www.dmnews.com/five-ws-and-an-h-for-content-marketing-success/article/375338/>

Connected Social Media. (2014). Content Marketing: What’s Wrong with Content-Centric Media Creation [Image]. Retrieved 21 Feb 2015 from <http://blog.connectedsocialmedia.com/>

Forbes. (2014). Death Of An Ad Network: John Battelle Explains The End Of Federated Media And What's Next [Image]. Retrieved 20 Feb 2015 from <http://www.forbes.com/sites/alexkonrad/2014/02/07/john-battelle-explains-the-end-of-federated-media-and-whats-next/>

John Battelle. (2015). A Return to Form in Media. Retrieved 23 Feb 2015 from <http://battellemedia.com/archives/2014/06/need-return-form-media.php>

Joubert, L. (n.d.) Marketing 101: Know Your Audience [Image]. Retrieved 10 Feb 2015 from <http://www.ponder.co.za/marketing-101-know-audience/>

Kaminska, O., McCutcheon, A.L., & Billiet, J., (2010). Satisficing Among Reluctant Respondents In A Cross-National Context. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No. 5, 2010, pp. 956–984. Retrieved 21 Feb 2015 from <http://poq.oxfordjournals.org/content/74/5/956.full.pdf+html>

Kaplan, R.S. & Mikes, A. (2012). Harvard Business Review - *Managing Risks: A New Framework*. Retrieved 10 Feb 2015 from <https://hbr.org/2012/06/managing-risks-a-new-framework>

LaRose, R., & Eastin, M. S. (2004). A social cognitive theory of Internet uses and gratifications: Toward a new model of media attendance. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 48(3), 358–377.

Madrigal, D. & McClain, B. (2012). Strengths and Weaknesses of Quantitative and Qualitative Research. Retrieved 20 Feb 2015 from <http://www.uxmatters.com/mt/archives/2012/09/strengths-and-weaknesses-of-quantitative-and-qualitative-research.php#sthash.UuN2PaMG.cfWgZkWx.dpuf>

Matakas, C. (n.d). Drops in the Ocean: What Will You Contribute to the World? [Image]. Retrieved 21 Feb 2015 from <http://buildthefire.com/tag/self-awareness/>

- McQuail, D. (1997). The Audience in Communication Theory and Research - Critical Perspectives. In Audience Analysis (pp.12-24), Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications. Retrieved 2 Feb 2015 from <https://library.newcastle.edu.au/articles/2341358.24736/1.PDF>
- McQuail, D. (2005). Communication theory & research - An ECJ anthology. London: SAGE.
- NewsGallery. (2015). Online Delivers Net Readership Increases for Newspaper Brands. Retrieved 20 Feb 2015 from [http://www.newsmaker.com.au/news/15321/online-delivers-net-readership-increases-for-newspaper-brands#.VPfIK\\_mUd8E](http://www.newsmaker.com.au/news/15321/online-delivers-net-readership-increases-for-newspaper-brands#.VPfIK_mUd8E)
- Nov, O., Arazy, O., Lopez, C. & Brusilovsky, P. (2013). Exploring personality-targeted UI design in online social participation systems. Retrieved 20 Feb 2015 from [http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/19380/1/Nov\\_et\\_al\\_CHI\\_2013.pdf](http://d-scholarship.pitt.edu/19380/1/Nov_et_al_CHI_2013.pdf)
- Price, L., Leong, E. & Ryan, M. (2005). Motivations For Social Internet Use. *ANZMAC 2005 Conference: Consumer Behaviour*. Retrieved 21 Feb 2015 from [http://www.anzmac.org/conference\\_archive/2005/cd-site/pdfs/3-Consumer-Beh/3-Price.pdf](http://www.anzmac.org/conference_archive/2005/cd-site/pdfs/3-Consumer-Beh/3-Price.pdf)
- Roy Morgan. (2014). Roy Morgan readership figures for the survey period 12 months to December 2013. Retrieved 20 Feb 2015 from <http://www.roymorgan.com/findings/5416-roy-morgan-readership-figures-december-2013-201402062258>
- Ruggiero, T. (2000). Uses and gratification theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. *Mass Communication & Society*, 3 (1).
- Qualtrics. (2010). Q Insights - Market Research: Safety Not Always in Numbers. Retrieved 9 Feb 2015 from <http://www.qualtrics.com/blog/market-research-safety-not-always-in-numbers/>
- Qualtrics. (2010). Q Insights - Market Research: Safety Not Always in Numbers [Image]. Retrieved 9 Feb 2015 from <http://www.qualtrics.com/blog/market-research-safety-not-always-in-numbers/>
- Quan-Haase, A. & Young, A. (2014). The Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Approach as a Lens for Studying Social Media Practice. Retrieved 20 Feb 2015 from [http://www.academia.edu/4443766/The\\_Uses\\_and\\_Gratifications\\_U\\_and\\_G\\_Approach\\_as\\_a\\_Lens\\_for\\_Studying\\_Social\\_Media\\_Practice](http://www.academia.edu/4443766/The_Uses_and_Gratifications_U_and_G_Approach_as_a_Lens_for_Studying_Social_Media_Practice)
- Sage Publications. (n.d.) Customer Engagement: An Important Concept for Marketing and Service Management Research. Retrieved 8 Feb 2015 from [http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/43652\\_JSR\\_Executive\\_Summaries.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/43652_JSR_Executive_Summaries.pdf)
- Schaffer, J. (2007). *Citizen media: Fad or the future of news? The rise and prospects of hyperlocal journalism*. College Park, MD: J-Lab.
- Schroeder, K, Drotner, K., Kline, S. & Murray, C. (2003). *Researching Audiences*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Singer, J. B. (2008). Five Ws and an H: Digital challenges in newspaper newsrooms and boardrooms. *International Journal on Media Management*. 10 (3), 122-129. Retrieved 20 Feb 2015 from <http://openaccess.city.ac.uk/3456/>
- Statista. (2015). Median age of the population in selected countries in 2014\* (in years). Retrieved 9 Feb 2015 from <http://www.statista.com/statistics/264727/median-age-of-the-population-in-selected-countries/>
- Time Inc. (2015). Why Companies Can No Longer Afford to Ignore Their Social Responsibilities. Retrieved 21 Feb 2015 from <http://business.time.com/2012/05/28/why-companies-can-no-longer-afford-to-ignore-their-social-responsibilities/>
- University of Kentucky. (2010). Chan Yoo [Image]. Retrieved 11 Feb 2015 from <http://jat.uky.edu/about/faculty-information/isc/item/157-chan-yoo.html>
- Yoo, C.Y. (2011). Modeling Audience Interactivity as the Gratification-Seeking Process in Online Newspapers. *Communication Theory*, 21(1), 67-89. Retrieved 2 Feb 2015 from <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.newcastle.edu.au/doi/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2010.01376.x/abstract>