GROWING UP INTERNET: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF A LONG-TERM
RELATIONSHIP OF A TEENAGE GIRL MENTORED BY A
MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN THE ON-LINE WORLD

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GROWING UP INTERNET: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY OF A LONG-TERM RELATIONSHIP OF A TEENAGE GIRL AND A MIDDLE-AGED WOMAN IN THE ON-LINE WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Employing the Uses and Gratification Theory, this qualitative case study explores a long-term, Internet relationship between a young girl and a middle-aged woman. Analysis of archived on-line messages, as well as an on-line interview and a personal diary, were used to gather the data. Using a systematic coding method for this triangulated approach to research, five reoccurring themes emerged from the data. These five themes offered explanation to the uses and gratifications of the two individuals in this case study. The data showed that the on-line participants sought dependable relationships, free expression, advice, affirmation of body image, and entertainment over the course of their eight-year, on-line relationship. These motivations were grounded in the Uses and Gratification Theory.
DEDICATION

The core of all my writing comes from an experience long ago in my life. As I continue to collect life’s experiences, I always look upon a tragic loss as the foundation of my love for words. With that in mind, I dedicate this and all writings to Michael Krosky. He was my first kiss and a fond memory. It was through the experience of his horrific death that I developed my God-given tools to express thoughts into words. I will never forget him or the power his death gave to me in the form of his undying inspiration.

In addition, I dedicate this piece of writing to my present and my future love, my husband. He is the man that holds me each night, both now and in the days to come (unless I am wide awake and tapping at my computer keyboard in the wee hours of the morning). He has never stood in the way of my pursuit of higher education.

I also dedicate this thesis to my daughter Liz, who although is my only child, always has had to compete for attention, due to an unseen sibling in the form of my writing career. She understood to let her mom be left alone when writing. She gave me space. And then she always accepted me back into her world when I closed my "word world" on my laptop and rejoined the action.
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Finally, I acknowledge my online friends, especially the young lady that this thesis discusses in depth. At one time, she was a complete stranger, but through the electronic relationship, she is one of the people I know best in this world, and likewise she knows me best. Many individuals from around the globe who have appeared as a mere email address have grown from being complete strangers to life-long friends. They helped me grow as a writer and a person, but most importantly, they "listened" to my black-n-white words, which were often louder than if spoken.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The qualitative analysis that follows is a case study of a long-term, Internet relationship between two individuals who formed an on-line connection. The purpose of this study is to explore how the two individuals used the Internet and what gratifications were satisfied by their on-line connection.

This qualitative research will be grounded in the theory known as the Uses and Gratification (U&G) Theory. A basic definition of the U&G Theory is as follows: people use mass media because usage satisfies a need and provides gratification.

Included in this introduction is a brief description of the two participants, referred to henceforth as “Dar” and “Car.” Dar, at the beginning of the on-line relationship, was a young girl, 14 years old, residing in the United States. Living in a dysfunctional home environment, young Dar turned to the Internet to feel connected. Dar engaged Car in an on-line group and developed an on-going relationship with Car via the Internet. At the beginning of the on-line relationship, Car was a housewife in her thirties, living in a functional family residence in the Midwest with her husband and preschool-aged daughter.
Dar and Car used their on-line connection in search of gratifications through the use of the Internet. And that is where this discussion begins, with an analysis of the Communication Discipline’s theory known as U&G.

In this case study, the literature review of the U&G Theory lays the groundwork for the qualitative research. The literature review will begin with the origin of U&G. This is followed by the timeline of U&G research, tracing the history of the theory throughout the 20th century, as mass media outlets grew from radio and newspaper, to the introduction of television. Finally, the literature review brings the U&G Theory to the current literature and includes a literature review of the uses and gratifications with regard to the Internet.

Once the U&G theory has been presented in the literature review, the case study’s methodology is described in depth. The demographic information about the individuals who are participants in this case study is provided. The three qualitative methods used for triangulation are described, including the artifacts of on-line messages, an on-line interview, and a personal diary. All were sources for gathering data. The coding process, which was used for analyzing the data, is explained in the methodology section.

In the results and discussion section, the significant findings emerging from the systematic coding process and analysis are detailed. The data showed that five reoccurring themes emerged, inspiring Dar and Car to maintain their eight-year, on-line relationship. Those five themes that explain the uses and gratifications which emerged from the data relevant to Dar and Car’s connection are as follows: (1) dependable relationships, (2) free expression, (3) advice, (4) body image discussion, and (5)
entertainment. These five reoccurring themes that emerged regarding Internet uses and gratifications for the participants will be discussed.

After the results and discussion are shared, a conclusion is drawn from the findings in this case study in light of the U&G theory and the Internet. Also, a suggestion for future research is offered.
CHAPTER II
LITERATURE REVIEW

There is an abundance of literature available pertaining to the U&G Theory. Its origin dates back to the 1940’s, when the uses and gratifications of the media were examined in terms of radio listening, as well as newspaper readership. When television grew in popularity in the 1950’s and 1960’s, the theory was revitalized and much was published focusing on U&G theory and television. The 1970’s became a transitional time for the U&G theory, when researchers shifted to examining the social reasons people seek mass media. Finally, with the introduction of the Internet, there was a resurgence of the U&G theory, as the new millennium brought with it a new information age and new mass media habits. What follows is an explanation and analysis of the U&G Theory as it has passed through each of these eras.

The U&G Theory’s Origin—1940’s and 1950’s

“This is the day of mass media,” according to Herta Herzog (1944, p. 3), known as the founder of the U&G theory, based upon her journal article entitled, “What Do We Really Know about Daytime Serial Listeners?” Herzog first coined the word “gratifications” in connection with media usage. Putting a research question in the title of her article, she laid the groundwork for the U&G Theory. Specifically, she examined
the reasons why millions of women routinely tuned into mass media and listened to radio soap operas.

Herzog stated, “At least 20 million women keep a regular rendezvous with these serials” (1944, p. 3). Due to obvious mass appeal of this scheduled listening stop for so many, she looked for answers to her research question and then dispensed the findings, including suggestions of why women sought this form of mass media.

Herzog’s research (1944) included a listing of probable characteristics of radio listeners as the potential traits women possessed, which would lend validity to the reasons why women in the 1940’s would seek out a daily form of serial entertainment in the mass media. She posited that women experienced certain circumstances, which drew them into the serials. These probable characteristics of women included the following: isolation, low intellect, personal problems, anxiety and frustration, and habit (1944, p. 5).

Comparing regular listeners of radio serials to non-listeners, Herzog (1944) examined four distinct personality characteristic traits: self-assurance, energy level, talkativeness, and emotionality. With regard to these traits, few notable differences emerged between the listeners and non-listeners, although Herzog’s findings did lean toward the serial listeners having slightly less self-assurance and lower energy levels compared to non-listeners. In general, there were no significant differences in traits.

Significant findings did emerge when Herzog (1944) examined gratifications of serial listening. Research showed that listeners experienced the following gratifications: enjoyment of emotional release, an opportunity for wishful thinking that compensates for a lack-luster life, and obtainments of advice (1944, p. 28).
This third gratification finding was an unexpected discovery. “Unquestionably then, many listeners turn to the stories for advice and they get it” (1944, p. 29). Herzog’s findings could be applicable to gratifications of media use today.

Along with Herzog’s publication, other researchers added to the origin of the U&G theory during the 1940’s and 1950’s. Lazarsfeld and Stanton (1944) left their mark with research in the 1940’s, examining how people use media to organize their lives. They posited that many individuals use mass media as part of their daily routine as they go about everyday life. Radio and newspapers, for example, were popular during the 1940’s and 1950’s as the precursor to television.

During this time, individuals found that consumption of mass media spawned easy participation in connection, which parlayed into conversation among common listeners and readers. Therefore, the mass media were connecting people to the world, then ultimately to each other when individuals shared a common media outlet and could discuss the common radio and newspaper content. “Superior habits of following the news…is likely to improve knowledge of current affairs” (Lazarfeld & Stanton, 1944. p. 223). Similar to Herzog’s research in U&G Theory, this premise still holds true in the new information age, which allows individuals to individually seek media outlets, then share and compare information gained from the media with others.

Also adding research in this early development of the U&G theory, Wilbur Schramm (1954) posited a unique approach in examining media selection. In 1954, he published a mathematical view of the U&G theory by creating his “Fraction for Selection” (Schramm, 1954, p. 19). This equation is expressed as expectation of reward divided by effort required.
Schramm’s equation expresses the relationship between the individual’s consumption of mass media, mathematically relating expectation of reward to that of required effort. Like Herzog’s research (1944), Schramm’s fractional expression can be applied to media consumption today, in that the usage of the television and Internet, as well as radio, requires little more than a flick of a switch. Thus, little effort is exerted and great reward is received, especially when compared to the effort required to purchase and read a newspaper.

Prior to publication of Schramm’s Fraction for Selection, Schramm posed specific reasoning for media selection, examining news stories read in newspapers. Using Freudian theory, the research was one of the first to focus on the social reasons for media consumption. In “The Nature of News,” Schramm stated that people seek reading the newspaper to satisfy the Pleasure Principle or the Reality Principle (Schramm, 1949, p. 260).

According to Schramm (1949), media consumption occurs under the Pleasure Principle, when readers seek to read news stories furnishing immediate reward, such as stories about crime and corruption, as well as sports, recreation, social events, and human interest. With the Pleasure Principle, readers “enjoy a vicarious experience without any of the dangers or stresses involved” (Schramm, 1949, p. 260).

The Reality Principle of news story selection, according to Schramm (1949), is utilized to represent the second class of news consumed, focusing on a non-immediate reward, obtained from such stories as news of public affairs, social problems, science, education, and health. “A thoughtful reader may receive a delayed reward of information and preparedness” (p. 261). Although there may be discomfort and not satisfaction
initially, there will be a reality fulfilled in knowing what dangers and/or stresses exist by consuming the mass media but the individual is not being put at risk by simply reading and gaining knowledge.

With regard to both the Pleasure and Reality Principles, Schramm’s research (1949) can again be applied to the selection process that people today make in their mass media choices. Both television and Internet content can be consumed to satisfy the Pleasure Principle or the Reality Principle. In addition, Schramm’s research also shared some other concepts of media selection that are applicable to today’s media consumption.

One concept relates to *reward*. When a stimulus is presented and a response made, which is rewarded, then that response will be repeatedly reinforced. This concept from Schramm (1949) applies to the notion that individuals seek television and Internet usage repeatedly when patterns of positive responses occur. Another of Schramm’s concepts is *reward-driven*. Most of the immediate rewards are important in news selection for satisfaction; however, the news in the delayed reward form is also important due to the arousal of tensions that give way to an individual’s ability to be informed and ability to survive and be better prepared socially. Based on this concept of Schramm’s, therefore, the mass media channels have the ability to keep the individual up to date on the latest information. A third concept belonging to Schramm relates to *proximity*. He stated that rewards are found in mass media consumption when the consumer can identify with the news. There is a feeling of proximity, lending to news value. Schramm’s concept here is applicable today, more so than ever before, with the closeness of individuals from around the world due to television and the Internet.
It is again noted that findings from the 1940’s and 1950’s are highly applicable to current mass media consumption, especially the uses and gratifications of television and the Internet. Both forms work to create the proximity effect. Specifically, on-line communities on the Internet provide ways for an individual to feel a positive response, keep up to date, and lend proximity. According to Schramm: “One of the startling accomplishments of mass communication has been to bring corners and faraway people almost next door” (Schramm, 1949, p. 265).

The U&G Theory and Television—1960’s

With the dawning of the age of television, a new arena was opened for the U&G Theory. As this new medium emerged, so too did a revitalization of the theory. “There is a need to know what people do with the media, what uses they make of what the media now give them, what satisfactions they enjoy, and indeed, what part of media play in their personal lives” (Katz & Foulkes, 1962, p. 377).

Katz and Foulkes (1962) published their research on the use of mass media, examining the use of television as an “escape.” When asked what people do with the media, they often responded by stating that usage of television assists to relieve tensions. “Everyday roles in modern society give rise to tensions or drives (stemming from alienation or felt deprivation) which lead one to high exposure to mass media with its characteristic context (television) and its characteristic content (fantasy) from which, via psychological processes such as identification, one can obtain compensatory gratifications, and perhaps as an unanticipated consequence, ‘narcotization’ of other role
“obligations” (p. 379). In other words, Katz and Foulkes suggested that to watch TV is to enter a dream world, which substitutes fantasy for real life.

In addition to this initial escapism posit regarding television usage, Katz and Foulkes (1962) found another media compensation with television. Their research suggested that, not only could the media be used for escape, it could also be used to maintain relationships by transcending to real life experiences. The same behavior of television watching can cause withdrawal but can also contribute to successful socialization at work by participating in discussion about mass media consumed in previous experiences. These latent consequences of media consumption might be considered positive effects of television viewing. Therefore, the result of exposure to television can be dysfunctional, when classified as excessive escape, and functional, when used to connect socially. Again, these ideas can hold true for all forms of mass communication, especially the Internet, which can be utilized functionally and dysfunctionally.

The positive functions of mass media were the topic of Mendelsohn’s work published in 1964. He posited three perspectives in his study of mass communication (Mendelsohn, 1964, p. 30-33): (1) Society cannot exist without communication; communication cannot occur outside a social system. (2) Mass communications affect the values and attitudes of those who use them and, in turn, the values and attitudes of these users influence mass communication. (3) Since mass communication is structured by and functions in relation to a social nexus, it must be viewed as only one of many factors bearing on individual and social behavior. Applied, these concepts demonstrate the notion of interactivity, with society’s use of television influencing television in a
reciprocal relationship. In addition to television, the Internet can also be placed under the umbrella of these concepts.

As television grew in popularity, the research based on the U&G Theory continued. In 1969, Greenberg and Dominick studied more specific uses and gratifications of television. Their work looked at exposure to television and found several benefits, namely that it could be used as a learning tool. Although some television viewers were more likely to use the media for escape, some found their viewing to be a “school-of-life” notion, with “youth in particular depending on TV more as a learning instrument” (Greenberg & Dominick, 1969 p. 342). Television studies such as that noted above led the way for research focusing on the social reasons for mass media consumption compiled in the 1970’s.

The U&G Theory and Social Development—1970’s

In the 1950’s, Schramm (1954) was the one of the first to hint that individuals seek media for social reasons. This notion became a strong development to the U&G model in the 1970’s. In 1974, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (1974) published works examining the U&G Theory and social implications of mass media consumption. They furthered the concepts of the theory by outlining five elements of the U&G Theory (Katz, et al, 1974, p. 21): (1) The audience is conceived of as active. (2) The audience member selects the media. (3) Media compete with a variety of alternatives for satisfaction of needs. (4) People know their media use and needs and can report these to researchers. (5) Audience orientations should be explored, and value judgments should be suspended.
The five social reasons people seek media was another key concept offered by Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974, p. 21): (1) Social situation produce tensions and conflicts, leading to pressure for their easement via mass media consumption. (2) Social situation can create an awareness of problems that demand attention, information about which may be sought in the media. (3) Social situation offers impoverish real-life opportunities to satisfy certain needs, which are then directed to the mass media for complimentary, supplementary, or substitute servicing. (4) Social situation gives rise to certain values, the affirmation and reinforcement of which is facilitated by consumption of congruent media materials. (5) Social situation provides a field of expectations of familiarity with certain media materials, which must then be monitored in order to sustain membership of valued social groupings.

Katz, et al (1974) posited “mass communication is used by individuals to connect (or sometimes to disconnect) themselves—via instrumental, affective, or integrative relations—with different kinds of others (self, family, friends, nation, etc.)” (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1974, p. 23).

In 1979, Blumler contributed in other aspects to the U&G Theory in the 1970’s. He outlined three orientations, or typologies, for audience. The first of these is cognitive orientation, whereby the audience “looks primarily for information about some feature of society from the wider world around him” (Blumer, 1979, p. 17). The second audience orientation is diversion. “People want diversion of many kinds, including for example, the relief from boredom and constraints of daily routines” (Blumer, 1979, p. 17). Blumler’s third constraint is personal identification, or “the ways of using media
materials to give added salience to something important in the audience’s own life or situation” (Blumer, 1979, p. 17).

In another study published in the early 1980’s embracing the concept of socialization and media consumption, Palmgreen and Rayburn (1982) researched the relationship between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained from mass media consumption. The model they posited was based on media selection and gratification outcome. “Initially, the motivations which lead an individual to expose himself [herself] to a particular medium or type of content may not always match the gratifications derived from this exposure” (p. 158). A major conclusion from Palmgreen and Rayburn’s study was the reinforcement of the validation of the U&G Theory, but a caveat was added about the variety of functional factors that play a part in media consumption, such as media availability, work schedules, and social constraints. The overall conclusions are applicable to media usage and gratifications of today’s medium choices.

The U&G Theory and Audience—1980’s

Research in the 1980’s continued to emphasis the U&G Theory and television. As the mass audience sought this form of entertainment and information, the U&G Theory served as a basis for these studies, attempting to explain needs, motives, media use, and media function.

Much of the research conducted had an emphasis on motivation of audience. In 1984, Bryant and Zillmann examined psychological characteristics and television selection. They were seeking to understand how the viewer selects a television show for consumption. The choices of viewing on television could be relaxing or exciting. Bryant
and Zillman posed the question: What type of audience sought what type of programming?

Bryant and Zillman (1984) found that many television audience members characterized as bored sought programs that were exciting. Audience members who reported that they were stressed sought both exciting programming as well as relaxing shows. The researchers posited that the television consumption “can greatly alter viewers’ levels of arousal, and hence, influence their affective and emotional behavior” (Bryant & Zillmann, 1984, p. 1). This was an example of linking the uses and gratifications of an audience, specifically the television viewing audience, and effects.

In 1981, it was Windahl (1981) who connected the U&G Theory to effects of the media based on audience activity. An individual’s consumption of mass media, Windahl posited, was a conscious effort to satisfy a human need, formed by social and individual characteristics, which leads up to motives for need fulfillment. The uses made of the media’s content, he claimed, will have consequences at different levels, ultimately causing an effect. This combination of U&G Theory with effects theory can be expressed in the catchphrase of mass media, whereby “the effects tradition is interested in ‘what media do to people,’ whereas the gratifications tradition pays attention to ‘what people do with the media’” (Windahl, 1981, p. 176).

The two approaches focus on different outcomes for audience members. An effects theory researcher examines the effects of media content, whereas the U&G researcher looks for consequences of media use. It is from these two approaches that Windahl (1981) created the word “conseffect,” defined as “partly results of content mediated by use and partly mediated use in itself” (Windahl, 1981, p. 180). Thus, this
combination of terms to create one term was revolutionary in paving the way for audience activity.

Continuing an emphasis on audience and the U&G Theory, audience motives was the topic of Rubin’s study (1984). He studied the habits of two types of television viewers: instrumental and ritualized viewers (Rubin, 1984, p. 69). *Instrumental users* are those individuals who seek media consumption based on goal-directed use of content to gratify informational needs or motives, whereas *ritualized users* are those individuals who seek media consumption based on habitual use of a medium to gratify diversionary needs or motives. This typing of viewers lends itself to the concept of audience activeness as a variable, dependent upon goal orientation.

Rubin’s study (1984) found that “ritualized television use appears to be habitual, frequent, and indicate a high regard for television as a medium. Instrumental television viewing appears to be purposeful, selective, and goal-directed, without being frequent or indicating a high regard for the importance of the medium” (p. 75).

Rubin’s study (1984) suggested that the variable of audience activeness should be tested in future studies. Levy and Windahl (1984) did just that by examining further the concepts of *audience selectivity, audience involvement, and audience use*. They posited that “different types and amounts of activity in different communication settings and at different times” would result in variable audience activity levels. The findings of their study indicated the following: (1) Levels of audience activity vary directly with gratifications sought by the media consumer, offering evidence to suggest that activeness of the audience and the U&G Theory are associated with media exposure. (2) The above finding suggests that the fundamental assumption of an active audience is correct, in that
all audience members are not active to the same degree. (3) Audience motivation for exposure-seeking may be best understood as some form of stimulus-response or learning behavior, pointing to an audience that is relatively self-aware and relatively knowledgeable about the ability of media to gratify certain social and psychological needs. (4) Audience activity and gratifications stand as important intervening variables in the communication process. (Levy & Windahl, 1984, p. 74.).

In other words, “more active individuals not only receive higher amounts of gratification from their media use, but also they are more affected by such active and gratifying exposure. Conversely, less active, less gratified individuals may be the most ‘obstinate’ audience of all” (Levy & Windahl, 1984, p. 74). Again, these concepts of audience activity and gratifications are applicable to users of the Internet.

The U&G Theory and the Internet—1990’s through present day.

The Internet emerged in the 1990’s, and with it, the resurgence of the U&G Theory. With the introduction of the Internet, a new opportunity existed to apply U&G Theory to determine that basic question: How do people use media? Like other forms of media, the Internet offers information and entertainment, but with an added attraction of the potential for more personalized choice and voice. In addition, there is a much broader array of opportunities, compared to other mass communication options. The Internet’s potential to connect humans to humans falls into the “sky’s the limit” category for reaching individuals.

As Internet usage grows, research in this area is gaining popularity, with new findings emerging. Several concepts have already been studied and are open for debate.
related to the U&G Theory and the Internet, as researchers attempt to examine Internet uses and gratifications. Among the vast array of research conducted, areas of focus include the following topics: (1) audience, (2) personality traits, (3) affective motivations, and (4) social and cultural impact.

Internet and Audience

Looking at the uniqueness of the Internet audience, there are three aspects of Internet audiences to be noted. The first is the *interactivity* of Internet usage by the audience. Interactivity is key with this new medium, due to the choices of web pages available to the consumer. Using the U&G Theory, Internet users can be placed into categorized dimensions of interactivity, such as dimensions of information collection and reciprocal communication that are higher levels of interactivity, or playfulness, which is considered lower levels of interactivity. Regardless of the dimension, “interactivity offers users the means to develop new means of communication” (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 15).

Also under the umbrella of audience is the concept of *demassification*, which is “the ability of the media user to select from a wide menu” (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 16). The Internet options allow the individual to tailor the message to meet needs and find gratifications, everything from one-to-one instant messaging, to posting messages, to simply observing chat rooms. Audience members can choose their media path through demassification.

The final audience concept for Internet audience is summed in the word *asynchroneity*, which refers to the time staggering of messages. Those individuals who communicate via the Internet need not be present at the same time at their computers,
since electronic messages can be accessed at each individual’s convenience. Responses can be addressed when time permits. Asynchronicity, as well as the audience concepts of demassification and interactivity, offers flexibility to Internet users. This, in turn, could bring high levels of gratification to Internet users, who access this form of mass communication at their convenience.

Internet and Personality Traits

As noted, the uniqueness of audience has been studied in connection with the Internet. The U&G Theory has also been utilized to explain Internet usage as it relates to antecedent factors. Studies have been conducted to examine personality traits. Finn (1997) had previously been a noted researcher in this area, investigating basic personality traits and mass media use. His research examined five traits: neuroticism, extroversion, openness, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. However, his findings indicated that there is no way of matching antecedent factors to media use. There are difficulties “in finding a theoretical link to every type of communication activity” (Finn, 1997, p. 524). Finn did find a slight link between extroversion and media use. This minor connection, however, should not preclude further study of antecedent factors because of the potential to explore more of the connection between the U&G theory and Internet users who are seeking rewards from every click of the mouse.

Internet and Affective Motivation

Internet users are motivated to boot up their computers and seek the interaction of the on-line world by exploring the rich resources, most often for information or
entertainment. Whether accessing the Internet for instrumental reasons or because of ritualistic behaviors, research has begun to examine the users of the Internet and new motivations. “These take into account the individuals’ needs to manage affective states or achieve optimum levels of arousal” (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 13).

Conducting their research, Eighmey and McCord (1998) found that optimum gratifications were found when there was a distinct interconnection between information and entertainment. When combined, the result rated highly when what was sought and obtained through Internet usage both informed and entertained. “Apparently, it is not enough to provide organized information…introduce elements of entertainment” (Eighmey & McCord, 1998, p. 192). Personal involvement and continuing on-line relationships accounted for the highest motivating factors in their study.

Internet and Social and Cultural Impact

The Internet is relatively new and research is needed to examine how its emergence has impacted users as individuals and the culture as a whole. Some researchers have looked into the expectations that Internet users seek, which keeps them returning instrumentally and ritualistically. “What people have gotten from the Internet is an important part of the basis for their current expectations of it” (LaRose & Eastin, 2004, p. 360).

Research has shown that the Internet can assist individuals suffering from lack of social interaction and thus aid in dealing with feelings of depression and loneliness. The Internet offers “social presence…a sense that others are psychologically present and that
communication exchanges are warm, personal, sensitive, and active” (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000, p. 177).

In addition to this substitution for social interaction, social identities can be formed via the Internet. “The anonymous and textual nature of the cyberspace allows one to overcome identity fixes, such as gender, looks, and disability” (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000, p. 178). In other words, due to the lack of physical presence, Internet users can choose their persona in order to explore other sides of their personality. They have the opportunity to reinvent themselves on-line to create a more socially acceptable self and fulfill fantasies. The new identity can allow Internet users to “make it easier to express and explore thoughts and feeling unpopular in most circles” (Richardson, 2003, p. 248). As with the U&G Theory through the last decades with new media, research will continue in this area of Internet usage.
CHAPTER III
METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research involves the case study of a long-term, on-line relationship between two females, Dar and Car, which has spanned from 1999 until the present.

At the beginning of the on-line relationship, Dar was fourteen years old. A single, white teenager, she was living in poor socioeconomic conditions in an urban setting of the United States in a dysfunctional home, with two teenage brothers, an alcoholic-abusive father, and her mother who distanced herself from the family. As time moved the relationship forward, Dar grew from a minor to an adult, and she departed from her dysfunctional upbringing, gaining upward mobility. At the time of this writing, Dar is a woman in her twenties, residing in a middle class, suburban home with a husband and toddler son.

At the start of the on-line relationship, Car was thirty-one years old. A married white woman, she was living in an upper class, suburban home in the Midwestern section of the United States. At that time, she lived with her husband and preschool-aged daughter. Not employed outside the home at this time, Car was a stay-at-home mom. As time moved forward and Car felt more comfortable with her daughter’s independence, Car sought employment outside the home as a newspaper journalist. Later, Car sought
higher education and pursued a master’s degree, as well as became a college instructor. Car is identified as a participant, as well as the researcher.

Therefore, this research falls under the category of participant observation, which lends itself to certain inherent biases, but also to the development of richer data, since an insider’s viewpoint is obtainable. The study had the approval of a university’s Internal Review Board for research involving the participants (see Appendix).

The case study of this eight-year on-line relationship between Dar and Car is the subject of this qualitative research. The use of the case study approach to research allows for descriptive, in-depth analysis in order to qualitatively capture the intricacies of a long-term, on-line relationship. When conducting qualitative research, the data can be gathered in a variety of ways and interpreted in a variety of way. Consequently, qualitative research is subjective by nature. Triangulation was utilized in the qualitative research methods for this case study to minimize subjectivity and create validity.

The approaches used to gathering the qualitative data in this study are as follows: Artifacts of on-line messages, an on-line interview, and a personal diary. First, the coding of artifacts that documented the history of the relationship were analyzed, noting reoccurring themes in the dialog exchange. Secondly, the interview questions were posed in a way to capture specific feelings about the Internet’s uses and gratifications sought by Dar, who consented to the interview. And, thirdly, the personal diary of Car allowed her distinct uses and gratifications of the on-line relationship to surface. Approaching the research from three angles, the triangulation method enabled the researcher to examine the case study from three different perspectives.
Because the data gathered in this case study included the researcher as one of the participants, the identity of Car is revealed; however, the identity of the Dar remains confidential, other than defining her demographics as a single, white teenager, originally living in poor socioeconomic conditions in an urban setting of the United States in a dysfunctional home, eventually departing from her dysfunctional upbringing and is currently a woman in her twenties, residing in a middle class, suburban home with a husband and son. Dar’s participation in this study remains protected.

As noted, this case study examines the on-line communication shared between Dar and Car and artifacts are available. Throughout the eight-year on-line relationship, nearly 10,000 messages were exchanged. The messages were documented in an on-line club format. This password-protected club allowed both Dar and Car private access to sharing confidential information. Either Dar or Car would share a thought by posting a message, often on a particular theme, and the other would respond at a convenient time, thus asynchronously. The frequency of writing and replying to messages has varied throughout the eight-year relationship. At times, messages were exchanged daily between Dar and Car. At other times, the taking-turns of replying to posted messages occurred on a weekly basis.

Recurring themes could be easily identified as the on-line conversation occurred over the eight-year time frame since the thought-sharing on a particular topic was often labeled by the initiator of the message. The particular topic would create a thread of replies until the topic was exhausted or until the topic segued into another theme.

For data gathering, three separate time periods of messages were evaluated: the initial relationship formation, a mid-point that constituted a turbulent time for both
individuals, and the most current messages. For messages, each line of text was assigned an initial code. Codes were created as new topics emerged. From this data, broad themes emerged as the qualitative data proved rich in providing insight into the uses and gratifications sought by both participants.

In addition to analyzing the artifacts created by the on-line postings, an interview was conducted by the researcher, in order to gather personal thoughts on the uses and gratifications of the on-line relationship sought by Dar. As noted, Dar initiated the on-line relationship at age fourteen, with her current age at the time of this case study as twenty-two years old. She readily agreed to participate in this interview process. Thus, her current thoughts as a young woman, wife, and mother were gathered. Questions were also asked of Dar in a manner requiring her to reflect upon the past, allowing for insight into her initial uses and gratifications of pursuing and maintaining an on-line relationship at a younger age. The question-answer process was one that offered flexibility to allow for themes to emerge.

Specifically, questions were posed to gather data on Dar’s feelings about on-line communication and her desire to pursue an on-line relationship and maintain it for eight years. In order to gather data about her past experiences in the on-line relationship, questions were posed in order for her to reflect on her dysfunctional home situation that she experienced in her teenage years. The researcher formed questions to gather data on how the on-line relationship offered support. Questions sought reasons from Dar as to why she chose on-line written communication as a means to supplement her adolescent years and beyond.
The transcript of the on-line interview was evaluated in the same way as the on-line messages. Lines were initially coded. Then, broad themes emerged, capturing Dar’s motives for participation in the on-line relationship.

Analyzing the transcript of a personal diary from Car constituted the final aspect of triangulation. For the purpose of gathering data in this qualitative study, the researcher is both a participant and an observer. The personal diary allowed for additional insight into the uses and gratifications sought in an on-line relationship.

As mentioned above, participant observation offers an insider’s viewpoint only obtainable through actual participation in the eight-year, on-line relationship. The text of the Car’s personal diary was analyzed by line, coded initially, with broad themes emerging from the data. The data from the personal diary then allowed for the uses and gratifications of Car’s participation in the on-line relationship to surface.

The total triangulation package is substantiated by common case study research methods for participant observation. “All research projects are guided by a strategy for how their main objectives can best be achieved” (Strauss & Whitfield, 1998, p. 9). Therefore, with this case study, the best approach was to have direct access to personal sources for optimum data gathering. For this unique case study approach, data can be gathered from several sources, including archived records, interviews, and other documents from direct observation (Yin, 2003, p. 83). “Case study’s unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence” (Yin, 2003, p.8). This method of triangulation gathered data and allowed for application to the U&G Theory.
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the qualitative data evaluated in this case study, several themes emerged providing insight as to the uses and gratifications sought in the long-term, on-line relationship between Dar and Car. By qualitatively analyzing the artifacts of on-line messages, as well as the on-line interview and the personal diary, five distinct and reoccurring themes surfaced, which were validated by the triangulation process. Dar and Car sought five uses/gratifications, inspiring them to maintain the eight-year, on-line relationship. According to the data, they are: (1) dependable relationships, (2) free expression, (3) advice, (4) affirmation of body image, and (5) entertainment.

Dependable relationships

The first theme, dependable relationships, was evident in the qualitative data gathered from both Dar and Car’s texts. Both sought to have stable relationships in their lives, which offered security, since both women had felt abandoned by other relationships, as was stated in the artifacts examined. In Dar’s case, she had a father who was abusive and both parents who often neglected her emotional needs. As she stated, “I am pretty much neglected by my parents…they replaced some of the physical abuse with neglect. Somehow, the physical abuse was better because at least then they knew you
existed…I leave the house more and more…I think when I have a family, someday in the future, I’m gonna appreciated it so much.”

Dar, therefore, desired dependable relationships outside of family life and clearly expressed this to Car. In a more concise posting, for example, Dar shared the value she placed on dependable relationship when she wrote one simplistic posting: “commitment rocks.” Other messages written by Dar include referencing the value of having a constant boyfriend named Jor: “I love Jor so much. We get more and more serious each day…he will always listen when I have a bad day.” Dar also noted her desire for dependable relationships from peers. Referring to a friend, Dar explained how a girlfriend grew distant and then came back into her life: “We just kinda talked like we always did. I’m so glad she is back.”

From the on-line interview, Dar offered detailed information about the consistency of the on-line relationship in her life that has become a dependable one: “When you think about it, this has been a constant in my life for so long. I have lived at home, went to school (shortly, lol), moved in with ex boyfriend, moved in with new boyfriend, gotten pregnant, married new boyfriend, moved into new house….all of this has changed in such a short period of time. The joy I get from messaging is knowing that no matter what changes, I will still have that constant I can rely on. I can still have unique connections with people, even though I am a different person than was even a year ago. It's a very comforting feeling.”

In Car’s case, she explained her need for dependable relationships in her personal journal. As a teenager, Car had lost a boyfriend to a sudden and violent accident. This loss at a young age had made her realize the value of having long-term relationships—
both friendships and marital. Car noted that friendships, even the on-line ones, were not taken for granted, as noted in this posting: “The on-line relationships that are best are the ones that are steady and without doubt. Like, here. I feel comfortable with you…we’ve been hanging here on the ‘net for a long time, steady.” Reinforcing that thought, Car shared her appreciation for friendship: “I’m glad we are friends who can talk openly.”

With regard to the stability and security in her marriage, Car conveyed the value of having a dependable, loving relationship with her husband, Mic: “The best thing about commitment is that I know Mic and I are forever.” In a similar way, Car expressed her need to have a constant relationship in her husband in this example: “Mic was right there for me when I was upset. He stood by me.”

In a case study conducted by Richardson (2003, p. 241), his research found that only 0.6% of on-line postings were coded into the category he called sanctuary, defined as a safe place on-line. Although the data gathered in this study disagreed with Richardson, the notion of sanctuary agreed with Katz, Blumer, and Gurevitch (1974, p. 21), noting that people seek media as a social situation when using media as a substitute for impoverished real-life opportunities. Specifically, the data gathered showed that both Dar and Car used the Internet relationship as a way to find sanctuary and have a dependable relationship in their lives. Dar’s dysfunctional home, as well as Car’s isolation as a stay-at-home mom, sparked the need to find media as a substitute for real-life relationships. Papacharissi and Rubin (2000, p. 177) noted that the Internet offers a social presence and that communication exchange can be warm and personal.
Free Expression

The second theme, *free expression*, emerged frequently in the communication between Dar and Car, as well as in the on-line interview and the personal diary of Car. Dar conveyed her thoughts on why there was ease at expressing herself so honestly and vividly in the on-line relationship: “I think all types of feelings are easier to share in writing. Everyone remembers being in elementary school, writing notes that say ‘Do you love me? Circle yes or no.’ LOL!…I think it is easier to share your emotions in writing because you are not venerable. The recipient is not standing in front of you. If things don’t go the way you want, you can just erase the conversation or shut off the computer. There is more follow through in real life.”

Many examples of free expression emerged in Dar’s messages, including her dabbling in drinking and drug usage, her pent up teenage angst, and her sexual fantasies and desires. Firstly, Dar openly shared many details of her drinking and drug usage during her teen years, including her rising addition to the tranquilizer known as Xanex in passages of text such as this one: “This week has been an addictive one for me. I spent over $30 on Xanex bars, which I have been eating every day. I feel like I am becoming addicted to them.” She was open about some of her personal experiences while under the influence as noted in this passage: “Last night, here was a twenty song marathon of Tom Petty songs. It was amazing! I love Tom Petty, so I took some pills, watched my candle burn, and yes, I danced alone in the middle of my room! Ha, ha! I can admit it.”

For Dar, she perceived that there were positive occurrences as a result of her drug usage, which she summarized in her on-line postings. An example of Dar’s perception of
the positive results of using Xanex was found in this message: “I will continue to buy them [Xanex bars]...they make me feel normal. After all, they do help me be creative in art class.” Another example of Dar’s perception that her drug use was positive is found in a message related to sexual activity: “Drugs make it easier for me to climax because I am more free and not self-conscious. I’m working on being like that more when I’m sober.” However, Dar did freely express the negative effects of drug usage: “The other day, a group of kids, about twenty-eight middle schoolers from the area, were in the hospital for Xanex. They took four to six pills and were extremely fucked up.”

This passage, which contained information about drug usage, continued at some length and highlighted other free expression topics that Dar often communicated openly. In addition to the information she shared about her intoxicated experiences, Dar wrote of her teenage angst and her desire to break free of her dysfunctional home life, as noted in this excerpt from the lengthy message: “I am ready to go off and start my life already. Enough of school, enough of this town! I am definitely moving...anyone who stays here ends up being unfulfilled white trash.” Repeatedly, Dar spoke of her fantasy to move to New Orleans once she reached adulthood. Her choice of New Orleans was summarized in this fantasy statement: “New Orleans is far away and has Mardi Gras. It’s my dream city—alcoholics everywhere and strip clubs.”

Along with fantasies to combat her teenage angst, Dar wrote of her sexual fantasies and desires, some of which were actually turning from fantasy to reality. She was frank with her sexual desires, as noted in passages like this: “It’s been two torture-filled days without sex, so I’m ‘hungry like the wolf’ for Jor, of course.” Examples of sexual fantasy can also be found in the data from Dar’s messaging, such as this:
“Fantasies are good, but I have a desire to act them out. I have a fetish for having sex in public, or at least with people watching.”

Although Dar communicated her sexual fantasies, as well as her drug usage and teenage angst, it is Car who most frequently expressed thoughts on the topic of sexuality. Candidly, she confided to Dar about her desire to have an affair. She expressed that her present monogamous commitment since the age of eighteen felt like “chains around her and desired to see what else was out there.”

An opportunity arose for Car to consider acting upon her desire to have an affair, and she shared with Dar the experience of the potential for infidelity. After Car had had lunch with another man, she came straight home and wrote to Dar: “I was testing the waters of cheating, not worth ruining my marriage over. Sure, I could have slept with him, but then again, I’d replace the curiosity of sex with another man with tremendous guilt, and the thought of having to watch my back. I don’t need that…We met once for lunch. That is the end of that.”

Although Car explained to Dar that the temptation of an actual affair was cast aside, Car did confess to Dar that there was still desire to use the Internet as a way to express sexual fantasies with other men, including one particular on-line man, described this way: “He is a guy I had a nice little on-line affair with…we had some great fun swapping sexual fantasies together…if we ever met up in real life, we would never see the light of day if I actually got into a hotel room together. LOL! But, it was all fantasy…I’m married, so my fantasies have to stay as fantasies.”

In addition to thoughts on sexual fantasy, Car also candidly expressed her frustration of being isolated in her role as a stay-at-home mom, such as in this example:
“I’m jealous of your concert going. When I was your age, I hardly ever went to a concert—either lacking funds or transportation. So now that I have both of those, I don’t have the free time since my daughter came along. That’s life. So you go enjoy those concerts for me.”

Two factors were noted in Car’s personal diary, which shed light on Car’s desire to freely express herself to Dar about frustrations, as well as sexual fantasy. Car was raised Catholic which limited her own expression as a teen. This limitation was coupled with the fact that Car suffered from a rare illness throughout most of her adolescence. Due to the lack of thyroid hormone, Car had never matured properly until her late teens, as noted in this passage from her diary: “I missed out on doing a lot of risky high school stuff, being Catholic. Plus, with my thyroid condition, I didn’t have all those ‘raging hormones’ as a teen. I was behind my friends, physically and sexually. So, why do I go on and on about my life to a teenager whom I’ve never met? I like the connection we have. Plus, having missed the full extent of my own teen life due to my thyroid illness, I can live my teen years again, vicariously through Dar. Drinking, exploring sexual fantasy. I suppose that’s what teens do. I’m just doing that stuff now in my third decade on the planet.”

Car often questioned her ritual of sharing very revealing thoughts to Dar, who was a minor in age, but worldly in other capacities. In her personal diary, Car wrote: “I probably should not be writing Dar on these highly sensitive, mature topics. But I like the fact that she is not judgmental and very open to discussion. I also like knowing that my VERY personal life and INTIMATE THOUGHTS are not being shared with someone that I can run into at the grocery store. She’s a friend, IN THE TRUEST
SENSE OF THE WORD, but doesn’t walk the streets in my day-to-day life as wife and mom.”

Free expression conveyed by Dar and Car agreed with Katz, Blumer, and Gurevitch (1974, p. 21), noting that people seek media to reaffirm or reinforce specific values by the consumption of media. Both Dar and Car shared questionable values with each other, in order to have an outlet of expression about risky behavior. Richardson’s research (2003, p. 245) confirms that individuals seek on-line connection to share thoughts in the hopes of discovering truths. These truths may be to confirm that the behaviors were in fact risky, or merely non-mainstream. The process of composing a message on a topic assists to define a situation in an individual’s life, and thus creates the opportunity to offer rational explanation for risk-taking.

In McKenna and Bargh’s research (1998, p. 681), they examine why individuals who feel stigmatized seek the Internet as an outlet for free expression. Their research explored on-line membership and the ability it has to offer a place to belong and assist in developing personal identity through the expression of stigmatized behavior, such as drug use or sexual fantasy. With regard to on-line relationships, McKenna and Bargh state the following: “People can be anonymous and do not deal with face-to-face interactions. Individuals can admit to having marginalized, or non-mainstream, proclivities that they may hide from the rest of the world” (McKenna & Bargh, 1998, p. 682). Thus, the format of the Internet allows for free expression.
Advice

The third theme, *advice*, was an outgrowth from the free expression which Dar and Car shared. The advice aspect of their relationship blossomed early on, as noted in one of the first exchanges between Car and Dar. Car wrote: “If I can give you any advice about being a teenager, it’s this: Enjoy it while it lasts, cuz being an adult has way too much responsibility.”

Advice was evident in another early exchange between Car and Dar. At age 14, Dar collected an experience after attending a concert of the band Sound Garden. Although Dar was rather worldly in “street smarts,” she still did not have many life experiences. When describing the exchange that occurred at the tour bus following the Sound Garden concert, Dar wrote: “Chris opened the window, and I was freaking out, and he was watching me jump up and down…Then, he handed me a key. I don’t know why a key or what it is for, but Chris Cornell game me a key. Me!” In response, Car wrote back to Dar, “The key was probably to a hotel room. Be careful, girl.”

The data showed repeatedly that, when Dar wrote of risky behavior, then Car would attempt to show her the error of the ways. Car offered Dar advice, or at least attempted to steer Dar into analyzing why she was engaging in risky behavior, such as drug usage. For example, as Dar shared her growing addiction to drugs, Car brought up the subject as delicately as possible and offered her own personal experience: “Well, if you think you are having an addiction problem, then it is good that you are recognizing it. I know that I drank A LOT… I found that I had to solve the reasons for my drinking, and that the drinking wasn’t the real problem.”
Car did not tell Dar to simply stop using drugs as a parent might do, but rather Car asked Dar to examine the reasons why she was engaging in drug usage. Responding to Car’s desire for Dar to evaluate the drug situation, Dar freely expressed her explanation with Car, as noted in this message: “I’m pretty sure I know the reason I take drugs and drink. I AM BORED OUT OF MY MIND!” Eventually, Dar later eliminated drug use from her life when realizing the negative consequences and upon separation from her boyfriend, Jor.

Dar frequently described episodes in her dysfunctional home life that demonstrated that she lacked parental guidance, including lack of recognition of drug addition by her parents. From the on-line interview, Dar reflected upon the extent of the parenting she received at home: “I always thought I had received the short end of the stick as far as parenting goes; my dad was ALWAYS working, and my mom was there, but not there… My mom was the worst. She didn't work, so would spend hours upon hours on the computer...doing what? The door was always locked, so you decide. This was all during my very turbulent middle and high school years. I would go to school, go somewhere after school, come home around 9 and knock on the bedroom door to let her know I was home, then go to bed and repeat. This was the extent of my parenting. On top of this, my parents fought all the time.”

During the on-line interview, Dar conveyed the results of her lack of parenting and her desire to not repeat the error of her parents’ ways for her son Lar: “So what is a teenage girl to do with no parental guidance? Sleep around, get older boyfriend, sneak out at night, drink all the alcohol, try all the pills and/or drugs that were available from said boyfriend, and drop out of high school. It honestly bothers me more now, being a
parent, seeing what a crappy family situation I had. I cannot imagine not being there for Lar, especially during the time when he will need me the most.”

According to Car’s personal diary, it was not Car’s desire to play the entire role of parent to Dar during her teen years, despite the fact Car knew how desperately Dar needed parents who cared about her well-being. Car realized that she could not be a substitute for the parental neglect happening in Dar’s home life. But instead, Car thought of her role as someone who could be a guiding force in Dar’s life: “I can’t be everything to Dar. But, I can be someone to her that she can look up to, ask questions. I can be her sounding board. It is said that, with age comes wisdom. I don’t know if I’m wise enough to raise a young girl long distance. But, I want to be there for her when I can and share my own mistakes in life, so that she can learn from them. Her own parents have severely dropped the ball when it comes to raising her. Even if her parents were there for her, I know there is always resistance for a child to accept advice from a parent. Advice is more readily accepted from a non-parent. Me, I can do what I can to be Dar’s ‘Internet mom.’”

As noted in this message, Car enjoyed the ability to practice her parenting skills, knowing that Car had a daughter of her own, who was a toddler at the time of this posting: “Sometimes, I read things that you write about your parents, and it helps me remember what it is like to have adults tell you what to do. It’s very helpful!! My daughter will thank you one day.”

In the on-line relationship between Dar and Car, the data clearly demonstrated that Car was acting as a guiding force in Dar’s life due to the lack of parenting. The data also clearly showed that, on many occasions, the roles were reversed, with young Dar
offering advice to older Car. Even with mature topics, Dar dispensed advice due to her worldly teenage experiences. For example, with regard to infidelity, Dar offered this insight to Car: “From my experiences, if you care about your guy, it is not worth it. I know I hurt Jor a lot when I was with other guys at the beginning of our relationship. I still get offers and guys hitting on me, but I don’t even consider it now. I just wanna be with Jor. Every once in a while, I’ll find a newfound appreciation that I have for him, so I know that no guy is worth risking him for.”

Although sometimes limited in her ability to offer advice, Dar did the best she could, given her age. Just like Car had taken a delicate approach to addressing Dar’s drug situation, Dar responded delicately to Car, after Car had messaged about flirting and fondling with another man.: “Mic didn’t notice any of this? I’m not saying you should be off fondling with guys, but then again, he wasn’t paying attention. Ugh, I’m like the angel/devil on your shoulder, so don’t pay attention to me.” Not concerned about the role reversal, Car welcomed the advice from young Dar, as noted here: “I’m glad you challenged me on this. That’s what I needed to hear.”

In other situations, it was the younger Dar that had more worldly knowledge than the older Car. Dar used the word “voyeurism” in a message, and Car was unfamiliar with the term, in relationship to pornography. Dar dispensed an explanation: “Voyeurism is basically watching sexual acts. It’s the opposite of exhibitionism, performing for voyeurs.” After Dar shared her worldly knowledge, Car responded with “thanks for the education.”

In another of the exchanges of advice in the on-line relationship, a comment by Dar gave an overall depiction of her motivation to maintain on-line connection. She
described the exchange of messages as a “journal with feedback.” Thus, Dar was stating her desire to receive advice regarding her freely expressed thoughts.

The use of media as a way to gain advice dates back to the U&G founder, Herzog (1944, p. 29). When studying women’s consumption of serial listening on the radio, Herzog’s findings showed that women were seeking advice. Advice seeking in media consumption agrees with Katz, Blumer, and Gurevitch (1974, p. 21), noting that people seek media to gather information to address problems that demand attention. In his case study of on-line messages, Richardson’s research (2000, p. 240) found that 26.0% of messages were posted in on-line exchanges with a genuine intent to share or help, which he called “service.” The data gathered indicate that Dar and Car were providing a service of advice to one another, since their partaking in risky behaviors had real-life consequences.

Affirmation of Body Image

The fourth theme, affirmation of body image, was mentioned throughout many on-line conversations between Dar and Car. Car, being slender in size, frequently shared her desire to have a more voluptuous body, as noted in this post: “I do have to tell you that since I have started my weight lifting, I can already tell a difference in my arms, but unfortunately not in my chest. I’m very proud of myself for getting into a good, little routine of working my muscles. I have you to thank for getting me started. See? There’s just another example of the good influence you have on me.”

Although Car wrote of her desire to accept a positive body image, it was Dar who most frequently discussed this topic, with Car affirming her. Dar conveyed these
thoughts on her body image: “I’m not stick thin, but I get hit on like crazy, and I do have curves (which guys love!). Of course, I’m not overweight either.” In another reference to body image, Dar wrote: “My boobs are HUGE…I’m becoming more and more comfortable with my body.” Car’s response was this: “Don’t worry about your body, Dar. You have a great one.”

Often, Dar would post photographs for Car to view on-line. Combining the concept of advice offering and its relationship to body image, Car shared her thoughts with Dar to affirm self-esteem and self-confidence: “Now that I’m older, I FINALLY realized that it’s not the body that makes a person sexy, although admittedly that does help. Really, it’s more about the attitude and the WAY you work it.”

With regard to positive body image, the literature supports that on-line Internet relationships can be used to affirm a positive image. There is motive in individuals to use on-line communication to gain self-esteem and to reduce uncertainty about self (McKenna & Bargh, 1998). Through both word and photographs, body image can be shared and affirmed.

Both Dar and Car offered each other the affirmation of positive body image in their on-line relationship. As noted with regard to advice offered on-line, the literature supports that the Internet also offers a place where people’s function is a role of providing service. Messages can be conveyed to express a genuine intent to perform good works, such as encouraging self-esteem and self-confidence (Richards, 2003).
Entertainment

The fifth reoccurring theme emerged periodically in the on-line discussion between Dar and Car, that being the mere sharing of entertainment. Since their initial engagement on-line grew out of a shared enjoyment for music, many on-line discussions reflected on current music, concerts, and then progressed to movie and television viewing. Outgrowths of Dar and Car’s shared music interest interests were also discussed in depth. This was especially true for Car, who noted that she often did not have someone in her day-to-day life to discuss the alternative music genre.

At the beginning of their relationship, Dar and Car frequently discussed the rock band, the Goo Goo Dolls, which was the initial commonality between them. Dar described her Goo Goo Dolls’ concert experience with regard to lead singer John Rzeznik: “I remember thinking to myself, ‘Oh God, that is John, he is so close.’ I couldn’t have prepared myself for the feeling. It was so incredible.”

Dar attended another concert, seeing the band Buckcherry live. She wrote an entire review of the concert and shared it with Car. Dar described in detail her concert experiences since Car had conveyed to her an eagerness to read every detail. An example of the Dar’s sharing the details of her concert experiences are evident in an excerpt from her concert review: “It was standing room only as I walked up to the front, and was only one person away from the barrier! I pushed some people out of the way (all is fair in rock and roll!). I was in the front row.” As noted, Car lived vicariously through these experiences shared from Dar.
Although Car was limited in her availability to attend concerts, she often shared her passion for music in a variety of ways. Often, Car shared with Dar the dreams she experienced that related to their shared musical interests. Referring to one of the Goo Goo Dolls songs, Car wrote: “I woke up this morning in the middle of a dream with the song ‘Black Balloon’ in it. I have got the Goo Goo Dolls on the brain.” Car described another dream sequence to Dar, involving another band member of the Goo Goo Dolls: “In my dream, I was living at college in my dorm room…I ran into Robby Tackac on campus…I offered him to come to my dorm room anytime that he needed some peace…Later in the dream, I’m at my desk studying when I hear a knock on my dorm window. And, then Robby pops into the room through the window. He puts some music on the radio and flops down on my bed, closing his eyes.”

In addition to sharing thoughts about music, Dar and Car spoke in general about movies and television. Dar spent much of her free time enjoying movies and often wrote about what she was planning to see at the theater, then later posting her thoughts after viewing it. For example, Dar wrote: “I think I am going to see ‘Orange County’ tonight. It looks like a funny movie.” Car’s reply was, “That movie looks awesome!!! If you see it, let me know what you think.”

In the interview, Dar expressed that, although many tension-filled topics were shared on-line, sometimes it was nice to converse about lighter topics. She stated, “Fun topic #1 is definitely music. I’m trying to find new bands.” Car’s personal diary reflected some thoughts on her desire to discuss music with Dar. She wrote: “My daughter can’t stand when I play the Goo Goo Dolls, so I usually have to wait until she’s at preschool to jam the stereo. And, it’s nice when I do because I can listen to MY music
and write Dar about it. She and I understand each other and our love for music. If only I could attend concerts like she does…”

From a review of the literature on U&G theory, the idea of using media as an escape is frequently discussed. Katz and Foulkes (1962) conceptualized media as an escape. Blumer (1979) proposed that diversion to entertaining programming was motive for seeking media. Finn’s research (1997) connected social deficits and devotion to media consumption. Ruggiero (2000) stated that the use of personal computers to use the Internet was a form of entertainment, linking gratifications of identifying interests such as entertainment.

It is Greenberg and Dominick’s research (1969) that sought connection between social class and teenagers’ consumption of media. Their research, with an emphasis on television viewing, discovered that lower socioeconomic groups of teenagers were likely to use the media more frequently than middle class teens. This literature agrees with Dar’s media consumption during her teen years when she was growing up in a poor socioeconomic household. Greenberg and Dominick’s research (1969) noted that lower income teenagers depend on media as a learning instrument, since neglect from parents offers little support in learning about the world around them. Although Dar had many influences in her teen years, she had the unique experience of sharing an on-line relationship during this time of her life. Dar “grew up Internet.”
CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This case study, through triangulated research methods, has analyzed the on-line relationship between two individuals—Dar and Car. It was discovered that their long-term relationship has maintained consistency due to the uses and gratifications that have been obtained through their reciprocal, healthy exchange of nearly 10,000 messages over the course of eight years.

The findings of this study showed that the U&G Theory assisted to explain the reasons for the continued Internet connection between Dar and Car. They desired to have a dependable relationship, allowing for free expression, the exchange of advice, affirmation of body image, and the mere sharing of shared entertainment.

Both individuals found uses and gratifications through their on-line relationship. In Dar’s case, she was deprived of parental guidance. In Car’s case, she also felt deprived of teen experiences and she felt isolated in her role as a stay-at-home mom. Both individuals had desire for developing dependable relationships in their lives, so they sought a high degree of Internet use as a substitute for real-life social situations. Katz and Foukles state that those who are alienated tend to seek media for refuge. They propose: “It is not at all self-evident what they find when they get there” (Katz and Foukles 1962, p. 381). The data gathered in this case study of Dar and Car point to a
desire to enhance one another’s lives through the on-line connection. That is what these
two individuals found.

Eighmey and McCord (1998) state that personal involvement is a key factor in the
continuation of an on-line experience. Dar and Car experienced a heightened, intensity
personal relationship, maybe even more personal than if the two had known each other in
a more traditional manner in every day life. The click on an on-line club for Dar and Car
has been a journey, not a destination—one filled with friendship, never judgmental,
always provocative.

As stated, Herzog began her revolutionary U&G journal article with “this is the
day of mass media” (Herzog, 1944, p. 3). When she originally wrote her journal article
regarding consumption of mass media, she was focusing on the medium of radio. Today,
we are seemingly still immersed in the “day of mass media.” Although the emphasized
medium has changed from radio, to the newest medium Internet, the statement holds
great truths, in that society continues to shape and be shaped by the mass media. Dar and
Car have most certainly been shaped by their Internet connection. Dar and Car have
shaped the way the Internet is used.

The fact remains that the Internet, this newest form of mass communication,
possesses a wealth of tapped and untapped information and entertainment. To unlock the
true understanding of the Internet and society’s gratifications associated with its use,
research must continue. A suggestion for future research would be to quantitatively
evaluate on-line relationships to determine if the themes that emerged in this case study
to be present in other on-line relationships. The U&G Theory would again be the theory
upon which the research would be based.
As noted, the U&G Theory is already a basis for Internet research. “By and large, U&G has always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communications medium: newspapers, radio, television, and now the Internet.”

The significant findings in this case study discovered that individuals could have uses and gratifications that allow them to “grow up Internet.”
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

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April 23, 2007

Carrie Tomko
724 Concord Place
Wadsworth, Ohio 44281

Ms. Tomko:
Your protocol entitled "Growing Up Internet" was determined to be exempt from IRB review on April 20, 2007. The IRB application number assigned to this project is 20070409. The protocol represents minimal risk to subjects and matches the following federal category for exemption:

☐ Exemption 1 - Research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices.

☐ Exemption 2 - Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior.

☐ Exemption 3 - Research involving the use of educational tests, survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior not exempt under category 2, but subjects are elected or appointed public officials or candidates for public office.

☒ Exemption 4 - Research involving the collection or study of existing data, documents, records, pathological specimens, or diagnostic specimens.

☐ Exemption 5 - Research and demonstration projects conducted by or subject to the approval of department or agency heads, and which are designed to study, evaluate, or otherwise examine public programs or benefits.

☐ Exemption 6 - Taste and food quality evaluation and consumer acceptance studies.

Annual continuation applications are not required for exempt projects. If you make changes to the study's design or procedures that increase the risk to subjects or include activities that do not fall within the approved exemption category, please contact the IRB to discuss whether or not a new application must be submitted. Any such changes or modifications must be reviewed and approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

Please retain this letter for your files. If the research is being conducted for a master's thesis or doctoral dissertation, the student must file a copy of this letter with the thesis or dissertation.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
Interim Director

☑ Approved consent form attached

Cc: Kathleen Endres
    Rosalie Hall, IRB Chair

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