Understanding the appeal of user-generated media: a uses and gratification perspective

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Abstract
Purpose – User-generated media (UGM) like YouTube, MySpace, and Wikipedia have become tremendously popular over the last few years. The purpose of this paper is to present an analytical framework for explaining the appeal of UGM.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is mainly theoretical due to a relative lack of empirical evidence. After an introduction on the emergence of UGM, this paper investigates in detail how and why people use UGM, and what factors make UGM particularly appealing, through a uses and gratifications perspective. Finally, the key elements of this study are summarized and the future research directions about UGM are discussed.

Findings – This paper argues that individuals take with UGM in different ways for different purposes: they consume contents for fulfilling their information, entertainment, and mood management needs; they participate through interacting with the content as well as with other users for enhancing social connections and virtual communities; and they produce their own contents for self-expression and self-actualization. These three usages are separate analytically but interdependent in reality. This paper proposes a model to describe such interdependence.

Furthermore, it argues that two usability attributes of UGM, “easy to use” and “let users control,” enable people to perform the aforementioned activities efficiently so that people can derive greater gratification from their UGM use.

Originality/value – UGM are an extremely important topic in new media scholarship, and this study represents the first step toward understanding the appeal of UGM in an integrated way.

Keywords Electronic media, Internet, User studies, Customer satisfaction

Paper type General review

1. Introduction
At the end of 2006, Time Magazine selected you, especially those people who contribute to user-generated media, as its esteemed Person of the Year. When stating the reason for singling you out, the cover story’s author, Grossman (2006, p. 40), writes with an inspiring style:

Look at 2006 through a different lens and you’ll see another story, one that isn’t about conflict or great men. It is a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before. It...
Although their influence on the world at large is still unclear, user-generated media (UGM) are fundamentally changing the world of entertainment, communication, and information, particularly thanks to their self-sustaining nature and ever-growing audience size. The questions thus arise: What are user-generated media? How do people use them? Why do people use them? Why are they so appealing to people? These questions are of great importance to today’s media and Internet researchers and practitioners. However, there are few studies that have systematically addressed them. The current paper attempts to fill this research gap.

Historically, UGM can be traced back to the bulletin boards on such portal sites as Yahoo and AOL in the 1990s. Over time, they have evolved to encompass blogs, wikis, picture-sharing, video-sharing, social-networking, and other user-generated web sites. Some of them like Wikipedia function as a collective gathering of information; some like MySpace and YouTube are to do with personal sites; and still others like Flickr are a mix of collective and personal sites (Lanchester, 2006). Although coming in different types, UGM can be summarized as follows, i.e. they refer to the new media whose content is made publicly available over the Internet, reflects a certain amount of creative effort, and is created outside of professional routines and practices (Wunsch-Vincent and Vickery, 2006). UGM emphasize the concept of “media” rather than “content” because they act like paid media (Blackshaw, 2007). They represent the extension of media production through new technologies, such as podcasting, digital video, and mobile phone photography, which are increasing accessible to the public (Wikipedia, 2007).

Over the past few years, UGM have been experiencing dramatic traffic growth. A study by Nielsen/NetRatings (2006) showed that five out of US top ten fastest growing web sites from July 2005 to July 2006 were user-generated sites, including ImageShack, Heavy.com, Flickr, MySpace, and Wikipedia. With a spectacular growth, UGM seem to usher in a quiet revolution in people's media consumption. YouTube, for example, has become the market leader in online video. According to Hitwise, a global Internet research company, the market share of US visits to YouTube in December 2006 was five times more than the shares going to the four broadcast network sites combined (including NBC, ABC, CBS, and Fox) (Prescott, 2007). UGM has also changed the way people learn about and listen to music. Hitwise reported that MySpace Music comprised less than 5 percent of the visits to the Hitwise Music category in December 2005, but the number increased to nearly 23 percent one year later (Prescott, 2007). Even politicians have recognized the power of UGM. Virtually all of the US 2008 presidential candidates have advocated their candidacy through YouTube and MySpace, where voters can easily look up campaign materials and make videos supporting presidential candidates of their own.

The above evidence confirms that UGM have become a social phenomenon. The fundamental question is: How can we explain this? This article argues that the appeal of UGM can be analyzed through uses and gratifications theory (U&G). An influential tradition in media research, U&G presents media use in terms of the gratification or psychological needs of the individual (Blumler and Katz, 1974). It assumes that
audiences consciously choose the medium that could fulfill their needs and that they are able to recognize their reasons for making media choices (Katz et al., 1974). The main objectives of U&G inquiry are to explain how people use the media to gratify their needs; to understand motives for media behavior; and to identify functions or consequences that follow from needs, motives, and behavior (Katz et al., 1974). While media industries continue to provide people with a wide range of media platforms and content, U&G is considered one of the most appropriate perspectives for investigating why audiences choose to deal with different media channels (LaRose et al., 2001; Ruggiero, 2000). Media scholars have factually applied U&G not only to those traditional media like newspapers, radio, television, and cable television (e.g., Babrow, 1987; Conway and Rubin, 1991; Elliott and Rosenberg, 1987; Mendelsohn, 1964), but also to many kinds of nontraditional media such as VCR, pager, e-mail, mobile phone, and the Internet (e.g., Dimmick et al., 2000; Eighmey, 1997; Ferguson and Perse, 2000; Ko et al., 2005; Leung and Wei, 1999; Levy, 1987; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000). Indeed, whenever a new technology enters the stage of mass communication, people’s motivations to use this technology have been examined through this perspective (Elliott and Rosenberg, 1987). Moreover, analyzing the social and psychological functions of the media, Katz et al. (1973) developed 35 needs that motivate people to use media and put them into five categories: cognitive needs, affective needs, personal integrative needs, social integrative needs, and tension release needs. Congruously, McQuail (1983) summarized four common reasons for media use: information; personal identity; integration and social interaction; and entertainment.

Based on U&G theory, this article provides an in-depth analysis of the appeal of UGM. It first addresses the questions of how and why people use UGM. It then addresses the question of what factors make UGM particularly appealing to people. Finally, the key elements of this study are summarized and the future research directions in relation to UGM are discussed.

2. Different uses, different gratifications
In this section, an analytical framework is proposed to explain how and why individuals use UGM. First of all, it suggests that individuals deal with UGM in three ways: by consuming, by participating, and by producing[1]. Consuming refers to the individuals who only watch, read, or view but never participate. Participating includes both user-to-user interaction and user-to-content interaction (such as ranking the content, adding to playlists, sharing with others, posting comments, etc.). It does not include one’s actual production. Producing encompasses creation and publication of one’s personal contents such as text, images, audio, and video. Furthermore, this article posits that different uses are driven by different motivations: people consume the content for information and entertainment, participate for social interaction and community development, and produce their own content for self-expression and self-actualization. In addition, this article proposes a model to describe the interdependence of these three activities.

2.1 Consuming for information and entertainment
As with traditional media and entertainment, individuals can go to user-generated sites to consume such contents as video clips, blogs, pictures, and music. It is reported that in 2007 half of American consumers (51 percent) watched and/or read content the
created by others, and the number jumped to 71 percent for American youths (August et al., 2007). The questions are why individuals choose to consume user-generated content and what gratifications do they expect to gain from such consumption. Previous U&G research on traditional and new media has revealed two typical motives for media consumption, namely, information seeking and entertainment (see Graber, 1993; Katz et al., 1974; Korgaonkar and Wolin, 1999; McQuail, 1983, 2000; Zillmann and Bryant, 1985). This can help us understand people’s media consumption on user-generated sites.

Information seeking is driven by people’s desire to increase awareness and knowledge of one’s self, others, and the world. This can be seen from the fact that people often visit Wikipedia to get some information about subjects that specifically interest them. It is also observed that people increasingly make use of MySpace, Facebook, and other social media to “learn how to make sense of things from their peers on just about any subject” (Bowman and Willis, 2003, p. 40). Moreover, as a source of news and information, UGM have been influencing the concept of “searching.” When consumers type in any product name into a search engine like Google, they may be as likely to find a user-generated site about the product as they are to find the corporate site (see Figure 1 for examples), but place far more trust in their fellow consumers than in advertisers and marketers (Blackshaw and Nazzaro, 2006).

**Figure 1.**
The salience of UGM in information seeking

**Notes:** As a new information source, UGM have influenced the concept of searching. For example, when searching “iPhone” using Google, one of the first five results includes a user-generated site (i.e., Wikipedia); when searching “iPhone problems,” all of the first five results could be considered user-generated sites, including the video-sharing YouTube and four other weblogs.
Compared with information seeking, entertainment may be more important in triggering media use (Rafaeli, 1986). For most people entertainment and mass media are nearly synonymous (Ruggiero, 2000). Take YouTube as an example: the majority of the most popular channels come from the entertainment-related categories such as entertainment, sports, music, comedy, and film and animation (see Figure 2) (YouTubeData, 2007). Furthermore, the entertainment content on YouTube is often like “snack food;” it is light, bright and digestible (see Idato, 2006). Such “snack” content seems to be suited for people with “limited” time. Since they have many things to do, modern consumers increasingly break their time into small periods and distribute these variable-length periods over the course of the week (Wolf, 1999). Accordingly, they come to consume pop culture like movies, television, and songs the same way they enjoy cookies or chips – in conveniently packaged bite-size nuggets made to be munched easily with increased frequency and maximum speed (Miller, 2007). We have seen that YouTube and its many imitators limit each video to a few minutes of clips for entertainment seekers. It can be considered a buffet of “snack” videos, highly meeting people’s needs for high-speed entertainment munching.

Like consuming traditional media such as television and magazines, people may use UGM for such entertainment ends as escaping from problems, relaxing, getting aesthetic enjoyment, filling time, seeking emotional release and sexual arousal (see Katz et al., 1973; McQuail, 1983). In addition, through the consumption of entertaining messages, people are capable of altering prevailing mood states, and that the selection of specific messages for consumption often serves the regulation of mood states. This

![Figure 2. Most popular YouTube channels](source: YouTubeData.com (September 2007))
is known as mood management theory (see Bryant and Davies, 2006; Bryant and Zillmann, 1984; Zillmann, 1988). In the case of YouTube, it provides users on a daily basis with millions of video clips, including comedy, films, animation, music, news, sports, and so on. Thus, stressed individuals can go there for relaxing clips while bored individuals can visit for excitatory materials, and through this method individuals can bring their physiological arousal and affect back to optimal, comfortable levels. To some degree, YouTube can be regarded as a convergence of the traditional entertainment choices of television, music, and film. It is thus plausible that mood management theory dwelling on the use of traditional media can be applied to YouTube and other similar sites. However, the users of YouTube seemingly have a much broader range of stimuli choices than those of traditional media; meanwhile, the users are often attracted to a couple of “most viewed” or “most rated” videos. So, how does the huge variety of content choice as well as the common content-ranking practice affect people’s selective exposure experience on user-generated sites? This question needs to be addressed if we want to further investigate the mood management function of UGM.

2.2 Participating for social interaction and community development

In addition to consuming, people may participate through interacting with the content as well as with other users on user-generated sites. User-to-content interaction occurs when people rate the content, save to their favorites, share with others, post comments, etc. User-to-user interaction occurs when people interact with each other through e-mail, instant message, chat room, message boards, and other Internet venues. Such interaction can be considered an indirect (in the case of the former) or direct (in the case of the latter) way for individuals to fulfill their social interaction needs (Chan, 2006).

The Internet has become a prime venue for social interaction since its inception (McKenna et al., 2002). Major Internet web sites such as Yahoo and Excite provided a number of electronic venues (e.g., e-mail, chat rooms, and message boards) where people can communicate with others who share their interests and values (McKenna and Bargh, 1999; Schumann and Thorson, 1999). Recent emergence of UGM has accelerated this trend, as shown in MySpace, Facebook, and many other social sites which are rooted in meeting people’s social interaction needs. But can the Internet really help people fulfill their social needs? Scholars with a negative view argue that the Internet is too inherently antithetical to the nature of human life, and too limited technologically to foster meaningful relationships (Beniger, 1988; Stoll, 1995). However, the positive perspective suggests that Internet use can result in decreased loneliness, decreased depression, decreased estrangement and isolation, increased self-acceptance, greater liking and acceptance by others, and widened social circles (see Cole, 2000; McKenna and Barch; McKenna et al., 2002; Walther, 1997).

Such a positive perspective seems to be supported by the success of such high-profile sites as MySpace. It is found that in the UK, 41 percent of Internet users already use MySpace and other social sites to interact with other online users around the world (Booz Allen Hamilton, 2007). In the USA, more than half (55 percent) of online youths use an online social site; specifically, girls use social sites primarily for reinforcing pre-existing friendships while boys for flirting and making new friends (Lenhart and Madden, 2007). Compared with traditional face-to-face communication, online interaction has the following advantages:
Beyond social interaction, people’s participation may also contribute to the formation and maintenance of virtual communities on user-generated sites. Virtual communities form when people carry on public discussions long enough with sufficient human feeling to form webs of personal relationships (Rheingold, 2000). In virtual communities, individuals can easily find others who share similar interests and goals, and are able to voice opinions and concerns in a supportive environment (Korenman and Wyatt, 1996; Lindlof and Shatzer, 1998; Tossberg, 2000). Moreover, by joining a group, people may get a sense of communion, such as a feeling of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). On MySpace, there have been 2,611,903 communities that are aggregated into 33 big categories such as activities, music, entertainment, fashion and style, school and alumni, and religion and beliefs[2]. These virtual communities represent places where people connect and interact concerning shared interests, support, sociability, and identity (Wellman, 2001), and may be as valuable and useful as their familiar, physically located communities (Horn, 1998; Rheingold, 1993).

Responding to content (i.e. user-to-content interaction) could also be helpful for the development of virtual communities. This can partly be explained by the reinforcement model, which predicts that people repeat actions that lead to positive reinforcements (Joyce and Kraut, 2006). Studying online newsgroups, Joyce and Kraut found that receiving a response to an initial post (regardless of its emotional tone) would increase the likelihood that the poster would post again. The reinforcement model may apply to user-generated sites: if content providers receive a response from other users, they may be more likely to post new materials. Given that virtual communities are often built around user-generated contents, responding to content is thus important for community development in that it encourages dynamic content creation.

2.3 Producing for self-expression and self-actualization

The third way that people take with UGM is to produce and publish their own content (e.g., videos, pictures, blogs, and personal home pages) on the sites. According to a recent survey, 40 percent of American consumers are creating their own entertainment such as editing movies, music and photos. While youths aged 13-24 are the majority of the creators at 56 percent, matures aged 61-75 are also beginning creating their own content (August et al., 2007). It is also observed that every day users upload more than 65,000 new videos to YouTube and more than 6 million photos to Facebook, most of the videos or photos being created by users themselves (see Idato, 2006; McGirt, 2007). All these numbers show that producing on UGM has occurred on a considerable scale. While many old or new media have also provided a space for users to produce, UGM grow out of and are specifically designed for people’s producing behavior. Producing is essentially the lifeblood of user-generated sites: without user-generated content, UGM
would not exist. The question is: what factors motivate people to produce on user-generated sites? It is likely that people produce content to inform and entertain others (Bowman and Willis, 2003), or to trigger others’ responses and participations. Assuming that humans are self-interested, this article focuses on how the self-expression and self-actualization needs drive people’s producing activity on UGM.

Self-expression refers to the expression of one’s own identity, especially one’s individuality. It is assumed that people have a need to present their “true” or inner self to the outside world, and to have others know them as they know themselves (Goffman, 1959; McKenna and Bargh, 1999; Swann, 1983). On user-generated sites, such need can be fulfilled through blogging, video casting, and other self-presentation activities, which allow the significance of who one is and what one does to show himself/herself. Sometimes self-expression is explicit, through direct self-disclosure; and sometimes it is implicit, through choices of topic, words, illustrations, and style (VanLear et al., 2005). Both approaches can help people construct a certain image of self and claim an identity for themselves. For individuals who feel highly constrained by the roles to which they adhere in their daily life, and thus do not express self-aspects that conflict with those roles, it may be more likely that they are driven to the Internet to give these aspects expression (McKenna and Bargh, 1999). Such self-expression is often accompanied by “the sense of being cut off from down-to-earth sights, sounds, textures, and emotions of everyday existence” (see Toffler, 1980, p. 404).

Furthermore, self-expression can be a process by which people attempt to control the impressions others have of them (Dominick, 1999; Jones and Pittman, 1982). As an individual engages in selective self-expression, even if the receiver processes this information rationally, there should still be the selective (often positively skewed) impression that the sender has intended (Walther et al., 2005). Such impression management is clearly evident in the context of personal home pages and blogs on the web. Papacharissi (2002) claims that personal home pages enable their authors to stage an online performance through which the individual’s personality or aspects of it are revealed. The authors actively engage in certain strategies to present the self, attract readers, and foster supportive relationships (Dominick, 1999; Smith, 1999; Walker, 2000). It has been found that authors who view their personal home pages as self-expression tools post more personal information, whereas those who use their pages as professional tools avoid posting personal information online (Papacharissi, 2002). Similarly, a blog can be considered a self-reflective account that serves the purpose of personal expression (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005). It provides a mechanism for personal publishing and represents the deliberate expression of one’s feelings and thoughts (Walker, 2000). A content analysis of the most-linked-to blogs confirms that A-list bloggers reveal more information about themselves than other bloggers and actively engage in impression management (Trammell and Keshelashvili, 2005).

In addition to self-expression, another important factor that motivates people to produce is self-actualization, which can be broadly defined as “working on one’s own identity and reflecting on one’s own personality” (Trepte, 2005, p. 170). The motive for self-actualization is primarily unconscious (Mook, 1996), but it can be considered a psychological motive that triggers certain behavioral goals of online producing such as seeking recognition, fame, or personal efficacy (see Bughin, 2007; Kollock, 1999; Rheingold, 1993). On Wikipedia, people can create new items or edit existing items,
with results that are immediate, obvious, and available to the world. Such contributing experience can help people believe that they have an impact on the group and that support their own self-image as an efficacious person (see Bandura, 1995; Kollock). For many users of YouTube and MySpace, desire for fame is the primary motivation for publishing their own content on these sites (Bughin, 2007). Take LA-based singer Terra Naomi as an example. She has used her YouTube channel to sing directly to the audience since February 2006. Thanks to such exposure, Naomi has changed herself from struggling singer to major label darling (she has signed to Island Records) (Rivera, 2007). Given their huge audience traffic, YouTube, MySpace, and other sites expect to attract an increasing number of “little guys” who produce there for gaining fame.

2.4 Interdependence of consuming, participating, and producing

The three UGM usages of consuming, participating, and producing are analytically separate but are interdependent in various aspects (see Figure 3). First of all, the three activities may represent a path of gradual involvement with UGM. People begin their relationship with UGM as consumer or lurkers. In order to seek information and entertainment, people visit user-generated sites to consume the content there, but they do not participate or contribute. After breaking through some barriers, individuals participate through interacting with the content and other users. Such interaction can help them build and maintain social connection as well as virtual communities. Finally, people come to produce the content on UGM. Producing is primarily an act of self-expression and self-actualization, both of which are aimed at constructing personal identity. It is noted that the path of gradual involvement from consuming to

![Figure 3. Interdependence of people's consuming, participating, and producing on user-generated media](image-url)
participating to producing is not followed by everyone. For example, some people may not respond to others’ content but they may publish their own work on the sites. In addition, there may be an involvement inequality among UGM users. It has been found that most users do not participate or create: they simply lurk in the background. In contrast, a minority of users usually accounts for a large amount of the content and other system activity (see Bughin, 2007; Nielsen, 2006).

As shown in Figure 3, producing is on the top part of this model. It initiates the life cycle of UGM since without user-produced content UGM would not exist. Specifically, the content is produced by an individual for the purpose of attracting others’ attention and soliciting others’ responses such as ranking, comment, and dissemination. Through exchanging their opinion/information about such content, other users may fulfill their social interaction needs, and even form virtual communities. On the other hand, the responses of other users imply responses to producers’ self-expression and self-actualization. Theoretically, such responses would encourage subsequent content creation from the original producers. In addition, the participating population can be considered a talent pool that includes many potential producers.

The content is also produced for attracting the attention of a larger number of consumers, and dynamic producing provides abundant information and entertainment for people to consume. Like participating, consuming can reinforce people’s producing behavior since producers’ self-expression and self-actualization can be partly fulfilled by consumers’ clicks. Also, as the bottom part of the model, the consuming population constitutes a larger talent pool than the participating one, from which more producers may emerge.

In addition, participating can contribute to people’s consuming. For example, “posting comments” can help consumers further their understanding of certain content; “rating” can help people easily find the most popular videos, music, or blogs; and “sharing with others” directly brings certain contents to someone for his/her consumption. On the other hand, consumers may become participants, thus helping enlarge the participating population and develop virtual communities.

3. Greater usability, greater gratifications
So far this paper has analyzed three activities that people perform on user-generated sites and the motivations behind each activity. The fact is that people can perform these activities on such traditional Internet venues as Yahoo and AOL. So what makes UGM, especially those highly successful ones, particularly appealing? The answer can exist in their great usability. Established in human-computer interaction design, usability refers to the software features that support users’ activities (Preece, 2000). It is argued that software with great usability is consistent, controllable, and predictable so that people can perform their tasks easily, efficiently, and pleasantly (Preece, 2000; Shneiderman, 1998). In this section, two usability features of UGM are examined for explaining how these features enhance people’s gratification.

One important feature is that UGM are easy to use. No matter what people do, such as consuming, participating, or producing, they can do it easily. A survey conducted by the Pew Internet Project reports that people’s science-related knowledge-seeking on Wikipedia is driven much more by convenience (i.e. easy to use this site to find information) than a sense that the science information on Wikipedia is more accurate than other sources (Rainie and Tancer, 2007). Another example is YouTube. If people
want to upload their videos to YouTube, they just need to take a few simple steps, and uploading can be finished in about 1 to 5 minutes for every 1 MB data[3].

“Easy to use” enables users to input very little, but the output for users may come in abundance. On MySpace, for instance, an individual creates a profile and gives only minimal personal information, but in return he/she could browse millions of random profiles, discover new music and post events, find friends who have “disappeared” for years, and possibly meet someone who might become his/her spouse. Users can do most of these things offline, but they do on MySpace in a more efficient way. It is argued that one reason of why MySpace and YouTube are highly successful is that they provide users with very efficient Internet experience: they often ask very little of users but in return gratify them a lot. This is actually consistent with utility theory, which suggests that people often desire those things that will maximize their utility, i.e. the greatest pleasure (Bentham, 1988; Stigler, 1950). Such gratification experience is also consistent with Wolf’s (1999) observation that nowadays people have limited time so that if they invest time in entertainment, they tend to demand more intense, more concentrated, and more satisfying returns.

In addition to “easy to use,” UGM let users be in control. Users control what they want, when they want, and where they want. In other words, users are not constrained by the computer systems. Such control appeals to people not only technically but also psychologically. Many scholars have identified control as a primary motivation for using the Internet (Flaherty et al., 1998; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000), and individuals who have a strong internal locus of control may be especially susceptible to the allure of the Internet (Wallace, 1999). In case of user-generated sites, the ability of control can be considered an important factor that enhances people’s gratifications. We may find evidence by analyzing three types of control that users can exert on the sites.

The first type of control is interpersonal control. Such communication modes as e-mail and message boards allow people to interact with each other without space and time constraints (see Burgoon et al., 2000; Kaye, 2005; McKenna and Bargh, 2000). On MySpace, individuals can build a connection and friendship with somebody in a far-away city or country. They can also leave a message on the friends’ profile and then check whether their friends have logged in and received that message. In addition, UGM allow people to interact without personal restriction and criticism. For example, individuals may fully participate in online discussion, or they may choose to be more passive and aloof (Kaye, 2005). Individuals may also easily choose to ignore bad behavior- their own or others’-and the mediating screen and interface is to an extent a protection from embarrassment (Chan, 2006).

The user-generated content has become increasingly asynchronic and dynamic, thus enabling people to exert content-based control. Being asynchronic implies that the content is available as time-shifted and place-shifted on the basis of user preferences. For example, YouTube allows users to have favorite videos so that it is easy for them to view the same videos repeatedly. Cooperating with mobile operators, YouTube also allows users to watch the videos from anywhere their mobile devices get a signal (Verizon Wireless, 2006). In addition, it has been suggested that media contents dynamically respond to individual actions (see Barker and Tucker, 1990; Hester, 1999; McMillan, 2006). This is being realized on user-generated sites, where content can be packaged, hyperlinked, and arranged in dynamic ways on the basis of consumer specific requests, knowledge, and data (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2006).
UGM also allow users to exert interface-based control by providing highly customized features, making a web site highly responsive to the unique and individual needs of each user (Kramer et al., 2000; Milheim, 1996). So far almost all UGM have enabled users to customize their profiles and channels, through adding color and sound, managing their playlists, editing their personal information, and many other ways. Customization provides individuals with an opportunity to express their interests, tastes, thoughts, and values. It also has the potential to generate positive attitudes and behaviors towards the sites (Carpenter, 2000; Graham, 2002; Kalyanaraman and Sundar, 2006).

Simon (1971) notes that we have entered into an attention economy, where a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information and entertainment sources that might consume it. By simplifying systems’ usability, maximizing people’s utility, and giving people multiple controls, UGM have been at the cutting edge to help people allot their attention efficiently and thus give people great gratification.

4. Conclusions
UGM have attracted an extraordinary audience and are changing the traditional media landscape. This article presented an analytical framework for explaining the appeal of UGM from a uses and gratifications perspective. It argued that individuals make use of UGM in different ways for different purposes. First, individuals consume user-generated contents for fulfilling their information, entertainment, and mood management needs. As an emerging source of information, UGM have been heavily influencing the concept and results of online searching. Compared with information seeking, however, entertainment may be more important in triggering UGM use. In particular, YouTube and its many imitators have dramatically reduced entertainment content to light, bright, and digestible “snack food” so that users can consume it with increased frequency and maximum speed. Also, through the consumption of the entertaining messages, UGM users may be able to alter their prevailing mood states, though the empirical test of this proposition is challenging.

Second, individuals take advantage of user-generated sites to interact with the content and other human beings. This participating activity often functions in enhancing social connections and virtual communities. The huge popularity of such sites as MySpace and Facebook has provided support for the positive view that individuals can fulfill their social needs through interacting online with one another. Interaction among users can also contribute to the formation and maintenance of virtual communities, where people gather due to shared interests, sociability, identity, and a sense of communion. Given that virtual communities are often built around user-generated contents, responding to content is argued to be an integral part of community development since it can reinforce dynamic content creation.

Third, people produce their own contents on user-generated sites for self-expression and self-actualization, both of which may ultimately be aimed at constructing their own identity. Self-expression can be achieved through such online behaviors as blogging and video casting. It not only allows the significance of who one is and what one does to show himself/herself, but also enables one to control the impressions others have of him/her. In addition to self-expression, people’s producing activity is also
driven by self-actualization, which is reflected in such goals of online producing as seeking recognition, fame, or personal efficacy.

Although the three UGM usages are analytically separate, in reality they are interdependent. They support one another, directly or indirectly, by helping people fulfill their respective social and psychological needs. This article proposed a model to describe such interdependence. It is noted that while these activities may represent a path of gradual involvement with UGM, i.e. from consuming to participating, and producing, such path is not followed by all users; also, there is an involvement inequality among users.

Furthermore, this article argued that two usability aspects of UGM, “easy to use” and “let users control,” enable people to consume, participate, and/or produce in a highly efficient and controllable way so that people can derive greater gratification from UGM use. “Easy to use” allows users to input very little, but the output for users may come in abundance. This is consistent with utility theory, which suggests people desire those things that will maximize their pleasure. “Let users control” involves interpersonal control, content-based control, and interface-based control. It is argued that these kinds of control appeals to people not only technically, but also psychologically.

5. Future research directions
The framework presented in this article not only integrated existing research findings from the U&G and other social psychological literature, but could also be a starting point for a systematic and empirical study of UGM’s operation, functions, usages, effects, and appeal in general. Methodologically, standardized surveys should be employed to empirically examine people’s consuming, participating, and producing behaviors and motivations. Such surveys can be complemented by a qualitative content analysis of posted videos, blogs, home pages, comments, and other documents to show what meanings users may actually obtain from their UGM use. Also, well-designed experimental research is much needed to test the application of such theories as mood management and utility theory. The questions for mood management researchers include: What does the high flexibility in selective exposure on user-generated web sites mean for mood management research? Is the confusing abundance of consumer choice producing stress and dissatisfaction? How does the ranking practice affect people’s selecting exposure? Does it mean people prefer to have “less” rather than “more” choices? Addressing these kinds of questions can significantly further our understanding on mood management. In addition, utility theory has outlined several criteria to assess people’s pleasure, including intensity, duration, certainty, propinquity, fecundity, purity, and extent (Bentham, 1988). Future research may qualify these concepts for measuring users’ gratifications from UGM and even for comparing UGM with other media.

It is worth noting that UGM entail a variety of activities that are driven by very complex human motives and have diverse and divergent consequences on individuals and society as well. Although the current study has attempted to present a “big picture” of people’s UGM use, it cannot be considered completely representative of the UGM phenomenon. For instance, the article employed several key concepts to respectively explain why people consume, participate, and produce, but there must be some other factors that affect people’s motivations. Also, individual differences in
socio-demographic and personality characteristics could play an important role in predicting people’s use of UGM. This paper briefly mentioned such differences, but it did not explore them in detail due to the lack of empirical evidence. Additionally, UGM are a broad category, which include various venues such as video-sharing sites, picture-sharing sites, and social networking sites. A kind of macro-analysis as conducted by this article may conceal some micro-level differences, which have different implications for people’s uses and gratification. Still the question remains whether the ultimate goal of UGM is individualism or community. Such question comes from scholars’ observation of the general Internet use (see Ruggiero, 2000; Singer, 1998), but it becomes more prominent in the context of UGM, where a combined media experience of personalized content and community tools is basically built in. Future studies will have to take all of the above issues into account if they attempt to further our understanding of UGM use.

Notes
1. Sometimes individuals upload the content created by professional media companies. This can be considered a kind of participating since it essentially involves privately sharing the content with others; but it can also function as producing since the content is publicized on the sites.
2. These data were obtained on September 20, 2007, from MySpace web site: http://groups.myspace.com/index.cfm?fuseaction = groups.categories
3. This information was retrieved on August 18, 2007, from YouTube web site: www.google.com/support/youtube/bin/answer.py?answer = 55746&topic = 10525

References


Further reading

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