

Antecedents to Audience Activity: Activators in the Activariation Model

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to suggest a conceptual model that illustrates what causes a variation in audience activity and how they relate to audience activity. Unlike uses and gratifications theory, this study looks at what actually causes the variation in audience activity. The model developed in this study – the Activariation Model – illustrates an overarching pattern of relationships between audience activity and activators (audience factors): individual, social and media factors. It suggests that media users are differentiated by activators, which will determine the levels of activity, when attending to media for specific reasons and to satisfy specific needs and this will lead them to end up with varying degrees of gratifications. This model can become a useful tool to examine media users and their factors in today's fragmented and individualized communication environment because it may explain the direct influence of audience activity on the use of new media.

Keywords: Audience activity, Activators, Act variation model, Uses and gratifications

1. Introduction

One of the main controversies among communication scholars centers on the nature of the mass media audience (Levy & Windahl, 1985). The issue is whether audience is an active or passive participant in the communication process and how the active or passive orientation arises. Its consequences for mass communication are also under scrutiny. One view is to see the audience as overwhelmingly passive and manipulated, with the mass media acting as a powerful agent of ideological control (Levy & Windahl, 1985). By contrast, the opposite approach offers an image of audience that resists media influence in an active, obstinate way, arguing that media use is essentially active (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955).

In fact, audience activity has been the core concept of the uses and gratifications tradition (Katz et al., 1974). The term, “audience activity” postulates a voluntary and selective orientation by audiences toward the communication process. It suggests that media use is motivated by needs and goals that are defined by audience members themselves and their voluntary, active participation in the communication process may facilitate, limit, or otherwise influence the gratifications associated with exposure. Levy and Windahl (1984) posit that audience activity is best conceptualized as a variable construct, with audience exhibiting varying kinds and degrees of activity and, in turn, the variation in the degrees of activity generates varying levels of gratifications from media use.

Little effort has been made, however, to establish a model that proposes what actually causes such variations in audience activity and the nature of the relationship among them. The main purpose of this paper, therefore, is to establish a generalizable pattern of relationships amongst variables surrounding audience and audience activity, which, in turn, affects the level of gratifications. Unlike the uses and gratifications perspective, which only sought to recognize the roles the individual brought to the use of the media, this study looked at what actually causes the variation in those roles - audience activity.

The model built in this study is labeled as “Activariation,” which presumes that when people use media, there is a linkage among their needs, motives, goal-directed activity, and gratifications. Looking upon audience variables (individual, social), media factors, and the elements of audience activity as causal variables, this model illustrates that when individuals use media, individual, social and media factors affect the level of audience activity of individuals, and the variation in the level of audience activity affects the level of gratifications from media use.

The term, “activariation,” stands for a variation in the level of audience activity when people are engaged with media consumption. We believe that this model is a different way of looking at media uses and gratifications in the sense that it investigates factors affecting levels of audience activity and how these variables are related to various elements of audience activity.

Since the “Activariation” model is mostly founded upon uses and gratifications paradigm, concepts are explicated from the review of previous empirical studies and theoretical works on uses and gratifications. Two concepts are discussed in detail: audience activity and “activators” (i.e. individual, social, and media-related variables). The variables are called “activators” as they affect the level of audience activity and audience activity of individuals is contingent upon each of these variables. Activators are the variables that directly or indirectly have influence on audience activity. Audience activity embraces eight concepts: before-exposure selectivity, before-exposure intentionality, before-exposure utility, during-exposure involvement, during-exposure attention, during-exposure utility, after-exposure utility, and after-exposure imperviousness to influence. And activators are divided into three categories: individual, social, and media-related variables.

2. Concept explication

Activators and audience activity both consist of several sub-concepts, which will form a set of relationships among themselves. Basically, the audience activity concept embraces the idea that all audience members are not equally or absolutely active; their activity depends on the level of utility, intentionality, involvement, selectivity, attention, and obstinateness, and these varying levels of sub-concepts are determined by activators that include audience factors such as individual, social, and media variables. Each category of activators has several different variables, which directly or indirectly influence levels of audience activity. In brief, our model states that the variation in the level of audience activity constructs is determined by activators, including individual, social, and media variables, and audience members of different levels of activity, which are determined by activators, may end up with different levels of gratifications from media use. It is, therefore, essential to start with the discussion with the concept of audience activity.

2.1 Audience activity

As noted earlier, audience activity is central to the tradition of uses and gratifications (Katz et al., 1973). One of the strengths and, simultaneously, one of the weaknesses of the construct is its “extraordinary range of meanings” (Biocca, 1985). A lot of divergence exists among scholars as to the correct interpretation, definition, and nature of audience activity (see Bauer, 1964; Blumler, 1979; Levy, 1978; Levy, 1983; Rubin, 1993; McQuail&Gurevitch, 1974; Levy &Windahl, 1985; Biocca, 1985).

The term, “audience activity” does not formally appear as an important concept until Blumler (1979) suggested a taxonomy of audience activity, which incorporates utility (people have uses for mass media), intentionality (media consumption is directed by prior motivation), selectivity (media behavior reflects prior interests and preferences), and imperviousness to influence.

2.1.1 Utility and Selectivity

Rather than mere selectivity, which implies certain defensiveness on the part of the audience, the “utility” concept suggests a certain level of rational choice in the satisfaction of clear individual needs and motives. The “selectivity” concept, based on the theories of selective attention, perception, and retention (Klapper, 1960), was used to denote selective exposure rather than selective perception and retention. Here, it is important to distinguish between utility and selectivity. The important point is that, before exposure, utility precedes selectivity in time because individuals without having any needs or motives for media consumption do not become involved in selecting media content or type of media that they want to use. Only if they think that they need to use certain types of media for specific needs or motives, do they become selective in choosing media content or type of media. Our definition of “utility” is quite different from that of Levy. Levy (1984) emphasizes utility as the social and psychological utility of the media content following exposure only. His example is post-exposure reflection on content, discussion, and “small talk” about the program that people watched or listened to. If utility truly means that people have uses for mass media, this should be applicable to all temporal phases of communication. Thus, our utility appears across all phases of mass communication process: before-exposure, during-exposure, and after-exposure.

2.1.2 Intentionality

Selectivity is differentiated from intentionality. Intentionality emphasizes the existence of prior needs and motivations that direct the selective behavior. In this regard, intentionality can happen before selectivity in the phase of before-exposure. It is different from utility because it does not ask whether media have a certain type of use, but utility asks if audiences have certain types of prior motivations before media use.

2.1.3 Imperviousness to influence

The phrase “imperviousness to influence” was first identified by Bauer (1964) and represents the idea of an obstinate audience. Individuals are regarded as impervious when they are not influenced by media messages and get no gratifications at all. Obviously, this concept should be included in the phase of after-exposure activity.

2.1.4 Involvement and Attention

Levy (1978) added the concept “involvement” to audience activity, arguing that “involvement” principally denotes the level of attention and cognitive effort during exposure to the medium. We divided this concept into two categories: attention and involvement. Attention precedes involvement in time. In other words, before getting involved in interpretation or use of media message, people usually pay attention to particular messages that they are interested in. People get involved in cognitive effort to interpret those messages only after they pay attention to them. During-exposure activity in our model, therefore, includes three concepts: attention, involvement, and utility.

2.1.5 Temporal aspects

Our model did not hesitate to use Levy and Windahl’s (1985) temporal aspects of audience activity: before exposure, during exposure, and after exposure. This temporal differentiation is meaningful because there might be changes in types and degrees of audience activity arising independent of their original motivations or needs during the entire course of media use. For example, if an individual first decides to watch a television show for entertainment purpose and he/she finds it informative rather than enjoyable, then he may end up with some cognitive satisfaction rather than getting affective or escapist gratifications.

2.1.6 Audience activity of Activariation model

Audience activity concept in this model is developed from modifications from Blumler’s original concepts and Levy and Windahl’s temporal aspects of audience activity. In our model, audience activity is divided into three temporal phases because the elements of audience activity play their own role depending on the phase of media use, but our model is different from the previous model in terms of the elements of activity. We have six elements in total, including selectivity, intentionality, utility, attention, involvement, and the obstinateness. This looks very similar to Levy and Windahl’s 1985 model. However, besides some facts that I already explained above, it is unclear why they have only three qualitative orientations (selectivity, involvement, and utility) of audience members rather than having all possible elements of audience activity (i.e. intentionality, imperviousness to influence, attention).

Intentionality is crucial to the meaning of audience activity because it emphasizes the existence of prior needs and motivations that direct the selective behavior. As uses and gratifications paradigm basically postulates that people use media for getting certain gratifications, it is intentionality that determines their prior motives or needs, which are the focus of uses and gratification perspective. Without intention, there will be no selectivity, no utility, or no involvement. Similarly, attention explains most of the during-exposure activity. Finally, imperviousness to influence will best represent the characteristics of passive audiences. Therefore, my model includes all six concepts, illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Elements of Audience activity

Communication phases		
Before exposure	During exposure	After exposure
Selectivity Intentionality Utility	Involvement Attention Utility	Utility Imperviousness to influence

Following the discussion of audience activity, the core of our model, “activators,” will be discussed. I label them “activators” because they are the determinants of audience activity and they will dictate how audience members are differently engaged with six different elements of audience activity throughout all phases of the communication process. It is better to understand them as all possible factors surrounding an individual’s media use.

2.2 What determines audience activity: the Activators

Both Blumler (1979) and Levy (1978) posit that consumers have different levels of activity in their selection of media and media content and in the level of content interpretation in which they engage. They argue that utility, intentionality, and selectivity all vary among individual audience members. Particularly, Blumler (1979) assumes that all audience members are not equally or absolutely active. This variation in utility, intentionality, and selectivity affects communication behavior and outcomes.

Lin (1977) suggests that media use is motivated by needs and goals that are defined by audience members themselves, and that active participation in the communication process may facilitate, limit, or otherwise influence the gratifications and effects associated with exposure. And Levy (1978), Blumler (1979), and Levy and Windahl (1984) also suggest that audience activity is best conceptualized as a variable construct, with audiences exhibiting different levels of activity. However, they did not mention anything specific about how actual relationships had occurred.

As mentioned, the aim of this study is to find a general pattern of relationships among audience factors and audience activity. In other words, it does not focus on a specific relationship between specific variables such as age, social position, or media orientation vs. audience activity but on an overall pattern of relationships among all possible variables and audience activity. We could specifically examine the relationship among individual variables and audience activity and end up by saying that, under some circumstances, audience activity varies with individual variables for consumption of specific television program with some effects. This is not my approach. Rather, we primarily want to see if there will be certain overarching pattern of relationships among three audience factors and audience activity. Review of previous empirical studies is intended to find and sort such variables by possible generalizable themes.

2.2.1 Individual factors

By age, we mean chronological age. Age is a viable descriptor of attitudes and behavior because an age cohort can tell us something about the role of individual and social factors in the life cycle (Rubin, 1985). According to Greenberg (1974), a peak television viewing level is reached approximately by age 12. Significant negative correlations between age and amount of television viewing for British and American samples of children and adolescents were found. The viewing amounts of 9-year-olds average almost twice as much as that of 17-year-olds. However, audience activity could not be explained simply by the number of hours children spend watching television. More importantly, a previous study found that children are purposeful viewers – having regular viewing times and favorite programs and that amounts and times of viewing change almost year to year as the child grows older. This shows their before-exposure intentionality. Individual newspaper readership or movie attendance was differentiated by sex. Particularly, several recent studies of the Internet use showed a significant difference in male and female motives for using the Internet. Yoo (1996) found that females were more likely to use the Internet for socialization purpose, while males used it for affective needs. This is an example of before-exposure utility and selectivity. Sexual differences found in the Internet studies are related with the level of selectivity, attention, and utility.

In terms of race, if the two cultures were really different, members of these cultures would be expected to have distinct functional orientations toward media use. Numerous studies suggest that Caucasians and other races use the media in a similar way to serve quite distinct ends. Strong racial differences in gratifications were suggested by Stroman and Becker (1974). In a study of newspaper readership, they found that demographically similar blacks and whites might show quite distinct media gratifications. Simple racial comparisons showed that blacks were less likely to be daily newspaper readers than whites and less likely to report newspaper reading about the 1974 American National Election. In addition, blacks were more likely to report they relied on television for their political news and less likely to say that they relied on newspapers than whites. This shows the difference in the degree of selectivity and utility between races.

Mood refers to affective states in which individuals would be placed into a negative, neutral, or positive state. It is expected that individuals in different affective states would choose different programs which, they hope, could relieve them. In their experimental study with the sample of 72 Indiana University students, Zillmann, Hezel and Medoff (1980) found that television viewers in different affect-conditions were exposed to different types of television programs. This finding indicates that persons select exposure to those materials that hold the greatest promise of providing prompt relief from negative affective experience. This study confirms that selectivity before exposure is different among individuals facing a different affective state.

By personality, we mean organized pattern of behavioral characteristics of an individual, including introspective, extrovert, and neutral. Obviously, this pattern of behavioral characteristics would generate different activity levels. Actually, although very few studies examined this special variable, Rosengreen and Windahl (1977) postulated the linkage between activity and personality types defined above. They found that individuals of extrovert personality were more likely to be involved in pleasurable media use while introvert type of individuals used media to achieve cognitive needs. Obviously, this pattern of behavioral characteristics would generate different activity levels related to selectivity before exposure and utility after exposure.

Integrating all the results of previous research into a comprehensive whole, we contend that audience activity, of course, is differentiated by three basic demographic variables: age, sex, and race. It is equally obvious that factors such as mood and personality may vary both among individuals and within the same person at different points in time.

2.2.2 Social factors

Turning to social factors, one obvious tradition regarding audience activity relied heavily on social and psychological perspectives (Rubin, 1993). Rubin (1993) argues that dependency on a medium result from one's social environment and restricted or prompted use of alternative media, which affect motivation and media use. Social factors introduced in our model might not include all possible variables related to social concerns of media use. However, through thorough review of the previous literature, we determined the scope of my social variables in this way: social class (socio-economic status), work-force participation (social position), social mobility, and social situation (number of participants).

Social class can be defined as a social stratum sharing basic economic, political, or cultural characteristics and having the same social positions. One possible hypothesis would be that considerable difference was expected in the media use and attitudes of low-income versus general population adults. Social class, defined in this paper as a social stratum sharing basic economic, political, or cultural characteristics and having the same social positions, seems to be a big indicator of audience activity. Socio-economic status has been tested frequently. As being closely tied to racial issues, socio-economic status has been identified to have influence on audience activity by Stroman and Becker(1974). As segmented by low and high SES, socio-economic status controls individuals' use of newspapers. People with higher SES were more likely to read newspapers than those with lower SES. High SES people preferred the local and national evening news programs, while low SES people preferred the morning news shows on television as well as daytime entertainment programs. High SES people were more likely to read much of the news content of the newspaper than low SES people.

Work-force participation is an issue of whether individuals are participating in the labor market or not. Previous research divided people into three categories of work-force participation level; full-time workers, housewives, and the retired (Blumler, 1979). He used the term, "social position" as a synonym of work-force participation. Blumler (1979) investigated the relationship between people's work-force participation, and their media-related needs. He had four gratifications items such as surveillance, curiosity, diversion, and personal identity and tested those with three samples of people. He found that each of three categories of individuals responded differently for each gratification item.

Similarly, social mobility asks whether individuals have a potential to move up in social class. If they think that they could jump up into upper class society, then their media use pattern would become different from those who still remain the same. Blumer's study (1979) also examined social mobility issue. He identified a relationship between social mobility and media needs. He found that other possible variables within social position category such as marital status and measures of interaction potential were also related to specific media needs. Social situation concerns the circumstances under which people use media. For example, when individuals watch television with several other audience members, possibly there will a decision-maker who determines the channel they watch.

It is assumed that there will be a discrepancy between individual's preferred channel and the channel actually viewed. Group viewing will affect individuals' media use in this way. This variable could be explained in connection with television program choice. Webster and Wakshlag (1982) examined the role of group viewing in mediating the free exercise of individual preferences. In terms of program content, situation comedy and crime-action programs were examined to see if there was any difference in viewing pattern: viewing alone or group viewing. They found that viewing with others diminished program type loyalty. These results could be interpreted as evidence of the impact of group viewing on program choice.

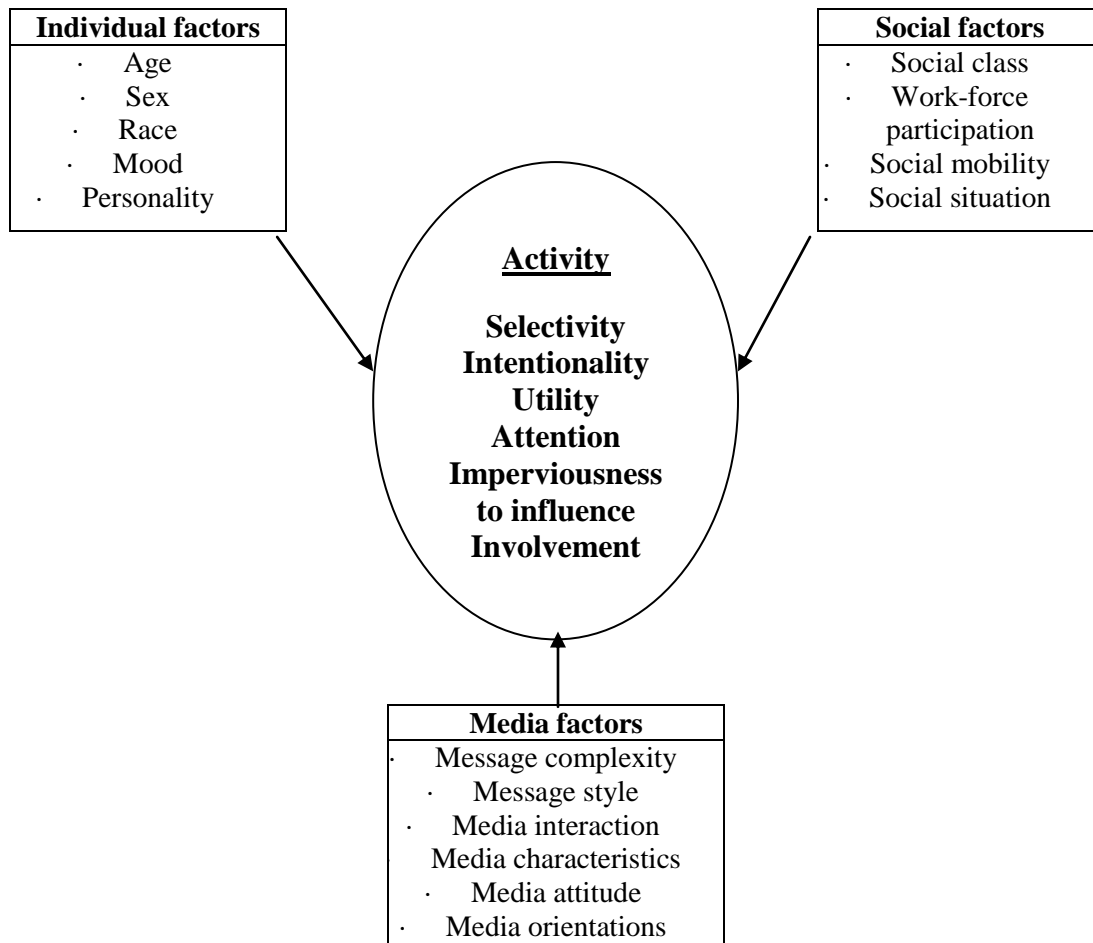
2.2.3 Media factors

We suggest that media vary in the way they give certain consequences to their users. Media factors such as message complexity, message style, media interaction, media characteristics, and media attitudes may invite or produce variations in the amounts of media consumed, in audience perceptions of media messages, in audience involvement with those media, and in audience gratifications. Message complexity is a synonym for program complexity. Message complexity, therefore, is measured by level of information contained in specific media programs. Krull, Watt and Lichty (1977) confirm that media users are expected to feel increased decoding effort as the level of information contained in media message goes up, and to feel bored as the information level falls. This study tested during-exposure differences of audience activity, attention and involvement. When exposed to media messages of high levels of information, active audiences are more likely to be engaged in interpreting information while limited audience usually are not.

Media messages are mainly transmitted to audiences by form of audio and video, in other words, sound and picture (moving or static). These two types of presentation would affect individuals' comprehension of media messages. For example, television and radio will generate different levels of audience activity because of the difference in their presentation type. Katz, Adoni and Parness (1977) examined whether seeing a picture (rather than just hearing the text) had some effect on the comprehension of the message content. They found that those who saw and heard news recalled more than those who heard only. The difference was greater among the best-educated people. Media message issues may well represent the during-exposure difference in audience activity, particularly attention. Media interaction stands for one of several ways of conceiving media relations between an audience member and the medium or content he/she uses (Nordlund, 1978). It indicates that individuals develop a growing interest in persons and characters appearing in the mass media and the varying levels of interest would affect audience activity during exposure. For example, contents of a high degree of media interaction potentials would include serials, entertainment shows, and quiz programs in television and radio. Contents of a possibly lower degree of media interaction potential may be news and current affair programs in television and radio. Through the survey conducted in the cities of Malmo and Landskrina in southern Sweden, Nordlund (1978) found that the more people are exposed to television, the more do they "media interact" with a variety of contents. There was a quite strong association between amount of media exposure and media interaction. Importantly, Nordlund (1978) tested the role of content preference. Do those individuals who prefer certain varieties of media fare engage more in media interaction? He suggests that there is a general tendency for preferences for content categories (i.e. sports, nature, geography, serials, politics, current affairs, entertainment, and news) supposed to have a high degree of media interaction potential to be positively associated with media interaction and vice versa. As media technology has developed rapidly, one would be interested in how gratifications change with the characteristics of new media (Williams, Phillips & Lum, 1985). Especially, the advent of the Internet has been greatly influencing media consumption patterns of individuals. Individuals are expected to show different patterns of their media use of such new media as the Internet, cable TV, video tape recorders, interactive services, teleconferencing, satellite television, and electronic mail (Williams, Phillips & Lum, 1985).

Media attitudes, perceptions of media realism and importance, also affect audience activity (Rubin, 1993). Attitudes about a medium and its content affect media orientation and effects. In this sense, media orientation and attitude seem to be related to each other. In other words, affinity, reliance, and dependence on a particular medium would affect our orientations to media use, which would result in differences in audience activity. Table 2. illustrates the elements of audience activity and activators which affect audience activity in individual-level, social-level, and media-related level.

Table 2. The Activators



3. Description of “Activariation”

Activariation means a variation in the level of audience activity caused by activators. It is a combination of two words, activity and variation. Activariation basically explains the gap of audience activity, which arises from using virtually the same media or messages by individuals who have different individual, social, and media-related orientations. The model is illustrated in Table 3.

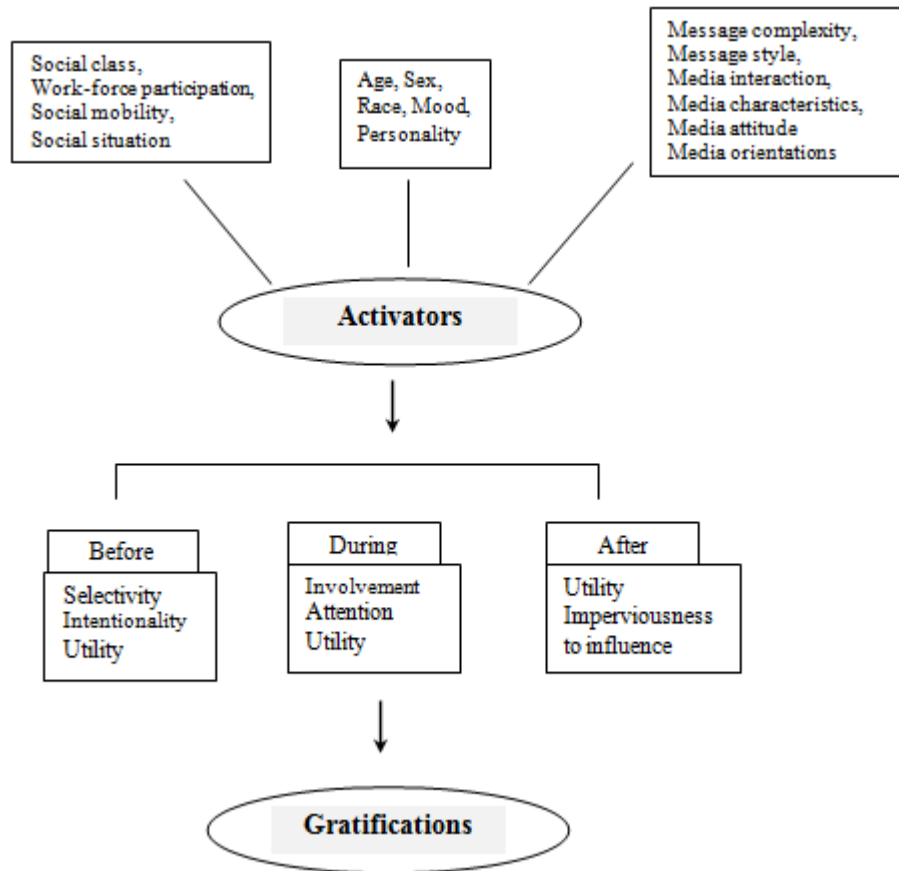
It is obvious that human beings differ from each other in potentially relevant ways such as age, sex, race, mood, and personality. It is equally obvious that individuals are from different social classes. They are differently engaged in the work force and they have different social mobility. Also, they are placed in different social situations. (e.g. watching TV with many viewers). Their media orientations, attitudes, and interactions within media are different and they react differently to different media and different media messages.

If these individual differences are to be explained with their media behavior, the outcome will be the difference in the levels of activity that they attach with media consumption. They would select or utilize different messages or contents for different purposes. They would get involved in media interaction either intentionally or unintentionally. Sometimes, they hesitate to be influenced by unwanted or undesirable media messages. Through different levels of engagement with different types of media, they would get emotionally or cognitively encouraged or discouraged. By using media, often times, they become satisfied with their interaction with other parts of society or with themselves. Sometimes, they enjoy themselves or release tension from everyday lives. Most importantly, an individual use of media will never produce the same kind and the same level of gratifications. Since everyone has a different level of activity, no one expects to have the same gratifications from media use.

Activariation also arises from different phases of media consumption. Active audiences may engage in this activity throughout the entire process: before, during and after. Somewhat limited audience members do not voluntarily engage in the earlier process. However, if they find that there is a potential to be gratified, then they will become actively involved with media use. In after-use phase, if they find that media really provide them gratifications, then, they will try to maximize these consequences. If not, they will become the obstinate audience. Passive audiences are not engaged in the whole process. Their before-use engagement will hardly be found. Rather, they habitually or unintentionally are exposed to media messages. They never try to select suitable media or messages. However, they may become more active in the after-exposure stage. If they find that their engagements are productive and useful, then they will try to actively utilize its benefit. Otherwise, they will easily forget the outcomes.

Activariation model has been approached from a sociopsychological perspective that embraces the idea that differences in individuals' social and psychological motives affect their media use. While uses and gratification paradigm suggests that media consumers use the media to fulfill certain needs, my model suggests that those needs can be explained by audience activity. Those differences of needs should be explained by activators. The causal relationship among activators, audience activity, and gratifications is simplified in Table 3.

Table 3. Activators and Audience activity (Activariation Model)



4. Contributions

The Activariation model is developed from the uses and gratification theory, which shifted the focus to media users and their activity to better understand communication phenomenon. The general conclusion of Activariation model is that media users are differentiated by activators, which will determine the levels of activity, when attending to media for specific reasons and to satisfy specific needs and this will lead them to end up with different levels of gratifications. This is to say that media effects are dictated by the degree of their intent or motivation determined by their intrinsic audience actors. Thus, unlike uses and gratifications theory that sought to recognize the roles the individual brought to the use of the media, Activariation looks at the factors that affect audience activity among the users of the same media messages (activators). This is an important contribution of the Activariation model.

Particularly in the Information Age, which may be represented by the fragmentation of media users, to better explain media effects, audience factors should be examined first to understand the difference in audience motivation and behavior. With the development of media technology, as people have more media options and exercise diverse types of communication channels, their media use is expected to be highly individualistic. As the media environment has been rapidly changed into an electronic information age, advances in media technology, such as satellite television, VCR, cable television, the Internet, and the Web TV, have allowed them to be in more control of the media. In this regard, the examination of activators will best explain the way their orientations to new media arise. We hope that Activariation will play a powerful role to explain media use of the fragmented audience members because new media environment will require highly interactive and individual audience activity.

Also, based on the Activariation model, it is possible to concentrate on the unique strengths and the broader subjective question of user motivation and satisfaction with computer mediated communication rather than focusing on how the use of new media substitute or compensate “old media.” This is mainly because Activariation can explain the direct influence of audience activity made on the use of new media.

5. Criticism

The Activariation model may come under some criticism. First, activators may not include all possible factors affecting individual activity level. Second, it is highly individualistic; taking into account, mostly, the individual factors. The social or political context of the media use tends not to be fully considered. Third, like uses and gratification paradigm, a methodological shortcoming may be found that previous research relies on self-report questionnaires, which some critics question in terms of reliability and validity. Fourth, the difficulty in defining and measuring the degree of audience activity is possible. Because audience activity is primarily audience-oriented rather than researcher-oriented, operationalization may become a thorny issue.

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