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## Women's uses of the Internet

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# WOMEN'S USE OF THE INTERNET

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Mass Communication

in

Theanship School of Mass Communication

by  
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## ABSTRACT

In this study I will look at the main reasons women use the Internet. Studies about women and the Internet are divided; some indicate less use of the Internet than men, but other studies show strong evidence of a narrowing gap in use. Due to this lack of clarity, a study that looks exclusively at women's Internet activities and usage is needed.

Although qualitative research does not test or apply theory the same way quantitative research does, uses and gratifications theory informed this study. This is an exploratory study of women and the Internet.

## INTRODUCTION

According to the Pew Internet and the Public Life, 67% of all Americans are using the Internet. That translates into 135 million people. The Internet has spread more quickly than any other communication tool to date. It has also become a common tool for the majority of Americans (Pew, 2005).

Americans spent \$19.8 billion online in the first three months of 2005 according to Commerce Department. That is an increase of 23.8% from the same period compared to (2004 E-Retail, 2005).

Additionally, on average Internet user spends 3 hours per day online, almost double the 1.7 hours the average respondent spends watching television. Obviously the Internet has major impact on American life. But much of the research done on the Internet is conflicted or tells only part of the story (Nie, 2004).

In this study I will look at the main reasons women use the Internet. Studies about women and the Internet are divided; some indicate less use of the Internet than men, but other studies show strong evidence of a narrowing gap in use. Due to this lack of clarity, a study that looks exclusively at women's Internet activities and usage is needed.

Although qualitative research does not test or apply theory the same way quantitative research does, uses and gratifications theory informed this study. This is an exploratory study of women and the Internet.

Much of the research has been conducted involved college students who were members of Generation X, or perhaps most recently the Millennials (the generation born in or after 1982).

These generations were introduced to computers early on and have used computers for most if not all of their adult lives. The baby boomer generation conversely, had to learn to use computers and the Internet to keep their jobs and get promoted in their careers. Baby Boomers now use the Internet as a resource but they had to adopt it as opposed to growing up with it. Additionally, the digital divide is no longer based on whether women access the Internet. The new digital divide is based on Internet access at home. Home access has increased but it is still only two-thirds of American households (U.S.C. Annenberg School, 2004).

In a speech given by Candace Corlett about marketing on the Internet to women who are 50+ she suggests, “Baby boomers are not a generation to be ignored.” She gives many compelling reasons, but here are the top three: Forty percent of 50-plus people use a computer at home. Additionally, a majority (68%) of on-line buyers are over 40. Finally since women live longer than men, in the over 50 population women online buyers are 52% to men’s 48% (Corlett, 1999, p. 24).

Research and Markets has recently conducted a study suggesting that websites should wake up to the power of the boomer generation on the web. While current senior citizens are less likely to use the web because these seniors retired before online access became common in the workplace, boomers are an entirely different story. The report estimates that in 2005 there are some 33.2 million 50 to 64 years olds online. That is three times more than the number of online users ages 65 and older. Companies will not have a choice according to the report to adjust to this largely ignored demographic with its \$1 trillion in spending power (Wood, 2005). Current baby boomers are 41 to 59 which would drive up the number of users and spending power if studied in this way.

For all of these reasons we will look at Internet usage and activities at home, by women, of this unique and transitional generation.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There have been numerous studies done on the differences in the amount of time spent using the Internet by men and women. Research suggests that men and women use the Internet for different purposes, and with different intensity. In appendix C is a list of salient research in chronological order.

### Internet Research

It is difficult to get a true view of the Internet when it comes to gender differences. Previous research often conflicts. Some research suggests that there is a gender gap. Other research indicates there is not. Some research suggests women use the Internet for a set of particular uses, then another study will indicate completely different uses. Based on these mixed findings, it is difficult, if not impossible, to get a clear view of the Internet.

Weiser (2000) for example, surveyed 506 college students and found women use the Internet mainly for obtaining course information, chatting online, educational assistance, and email. Men reported greater use of the Internet than females did for shopping, listening to audio broadcasts, building world wide web pages, searching for romance, searching for hard-to-find items, pursuing sexual relationships, staying informed with the news, viewing pornography, and participating in online games. According to Weiser the gender gap appears to be diminishing as gender differences were actually differences in age and Internet experience. Weiser's findings are puzzling. If all those surveyed were college students how much of a difference in age was there?

Another study done in 2000 casts doubt on the claims that gender differences in Internet use will soon disappear. This study again surveyed undergraduate college students to study gender differences in Internet usage. Younger respondents reported high levels of participation in



four of five Internet activities, (Email, World Wide Web, Usenet, Multi-user dungeons, and chat groups) as measured by frequency and hours of use. Furthermore, men and women held different attitudes about their personal experiences with computers, and the difference was not significantly less among younger age groups. With the exception of email, men used the technology more often and had more positive attitudes about their experiences than women (Sherman et al., 2000). Once again, when studying undergraduate students how significant is age difference between the younger respondents and the older respondents? It should be reiterated that the two above studies were conducted among college students. There is little variance in the undergraduate age group. It is difficult to generalize the above findings to the general population when the age range is so limited.

According to Bimber (2000) two statistically significant gaps exist on the Internet: in access and in use. The access gap is not the product of gender-specific factors, but is explained by socioeconomic differences between men and women. The use gap is the result of both socioeconomic and gender-specific phenomena. Women are catching up in use of the Internet, according to Bimber, because socioeconomic differences are lessening. But, women's intensity of use remains less than men's. Not only are there gender differences in intensity, but there are also differences in how men and women use the Internet. Bimber conducted three random digit dial telephone surveys with each of the three returning a little over one thousand responses. Age was not a parameter of this study. Bimber's research is interesting although it appears that in this study frequency equates to intensity. Frequent use of the Internet was defined for this study by daily use. More men were going online everyday so according to this study men use the Internet with greater intensity. This is not a traditional definition of intensity.

Studies do show that women's motives for using the Internet are different than men's. The Pew Research Center conducted a survey, showing that 60% of women and only 51% of men say that email exchanges have improved their connections to family members. Seventy-one percent of women say that email has improved their connections with friends, while only 56% of men say that it improved connections. Women (56%) say they would miss email a lot if they could no longer use it. Conversely only 43% of men would miss email a lot if they could no longer use it. What women are doing on the Internet also appears to be different than how men spend time on the Internet. This research indicates that on the web, women are more likely to seek health information, religious information, research new jobs, and play games online. Men are more likely to get news, shop, seek financial information, do online trading, bid in online auctions, access government web sites, and search for sports news (The Pew Internet, 2000).

Another study suggests that men shop more than women online. Alreck and Settle (2002) used a survey to determine that men like online shopping more than women. In fact online shopping is the only area where women were less positive about shopping than men. Some respondents thought of the Internet as primarily a man thing, while others identify conditions as time pressures, greater exposure to computers on the job to encourage Internet shopping. One would expect the image of online shopping to improve among women as they gain greater access and familiarity with the Internet, but this research indicates that the point where women find it as easy, informative and relaxing as browsing a catalogue will be a long time coming.

Shaw and Gant (2002) studied the gender gap of Internet use of undergraduate students via survey. The students were put into chat groups that met via the Internet and asked conversational questions to stimulate a chat. Participants were given regular questionnaires to track depression, loneliness, self-esteem, and social support. The research showed that women

are more likely to be motivated to use the Internet for interpersonal communication, but that both genders benefited from the perceived social support, and self-esteem they received from their chats. In addition both genders had lower loneliness and depression scores after their chats. The results of the study run counter to prior assumptions about gender differences in Internet use and the way the Internet affects users.

Using the Current Population Survey for 1997, 1998, 2000, & 2001, Ono and Zavodny conclude that although the gender differences do appear to be stabilizing, women continue to trail in the number of uses, as well as frequency and intensity (Ono & Zavodny, 2003). This was studied by looking at Internet use at home, Internet use anywhere, number of Internet uses, and frequency of Internet use.

Porter and Sallot (2003) looked into professional Internet use. Using a nationwide survey of public relations practitioners, 432 people responded to the email survey which studied practitioners' relationship with the web and whether gender influenced web use. According to Porter and Sallot, women have now caught up with men in their use of the web for professional roles. But men are using the web more for issues communication. This finding runs counter to research about gender differences in Internet use that suggests that women use the Internet primarily for email communicating.

There is little recent academic work published in the area of women's use of the Internet. In order to gain a larger perspective of women and their uses for the Internet several business research studies were consulted. Businesses are beginning to look at women's use of the Internet with great interest. This allowed for a more fleshed out understanding of where women are and where women are headed with their Internet use. Many of the previously held beliefs towards women and the Internet seem to be changing. Below are several research studies that indicate

that women's use of the Internet is becoming more and more important to business and to the general population.

Internet access has become a given to most of the mass population, it is topical to study why and how audiences use the Internet. Two-thirds of Americans, or 67.5 million U.S. households, have Internet access at home. That's an increase of more than 51% since 2000(Chiger, 2003). There is no need to think that the number of people getting on the Internet is going to slow or lessen anything in the near future.

The mass population including women is heading towards broadband access for the Internet. Broadband is in fact becoming the norm for Internet access. The Cable & Telecommunications Association for Marketing predict that women are the next wave of high-speed Internet customers. More women (57%) than men (43%) will be signing up for broadband services (CTAM, 2004).

Perhaps women's motivation for high-speed Internet is to be able to get their chores and activities done faster and more efficiently. A study released by America Online shows that 80% of mothers in the US who are online use the Internet to do chores and other activities, helping them save time every week (eMarketer, 2004).

Using the Internet as a tool to get a task accomplished (like completing a chore) appears to be a major motivating factor for women to spend their time on the Internet. Women are more motivated to use the Internet because they have success using it as a tool and time saver in their hectic lives. The more functions they use the Internet for, the more they use it for additional functions, and the more comfortable they become using the Internet generally. According to one study women generally use the Internet as a tool for activities, rather than as play or technology to be mastered. The study suggests that when women become comfortable with a technology

they see it as a tool rather than a technology. Discomfort with technology generally for women remains (Singh, 2001).

At the same time that the Internet is going mainstream, the number of women using the Internet has increased from a minority to an equally represented portion of the population (Royal, 2004). By 2008, according to eMarketer, there will be roughly 10 million more females online than males. Even more importantly, just as women influence three-fourths of the household expenditures offline – from gifts to health care they are poised to do the same online. Some data shows that women are already in a position of dominance. In 2003, women were responsible for 60% of total online spending. The effect of a larger female demographic shopping on the web could change the way that websites do business. Traditional female product categories have become some of the fastest growing on the Internet. Jewelry and watches grew 67% online between 2003 and 2004. Furniture and appliances grew 58% during the same time period on the web. According to the Consumer Electronics Association women are even taking over buying areas that have traditionally male focused like electronic gear where women account for \$55 billion of the \$96 billion spent online between 2003 and 2004. But the online environment still doesn't meet women's needs as well as a mall according to eMarketer. Shirt photos are all grouped in lines rather than having them grouped with pants, skirts and accessories so that outfits can be put together easily (Oser, 2005).

Although women may have been slow to take to the Internet it appears that they are now coming to the Internet in large numbers. In another article by eMarketer women made up the majority (51.6%) of the US online population for the first time in 2004, 51% closely resembles the US population at large – where 51% of the population is female. eMarketer projects that the female majority will become larger over the next five years making women the new

demographic of the Internet. This is due in part, because the Internet allows women to do more in a shorter period, of time like chores. Women have long used the Internet as a communications tool are also showing interest in online games, health content, music, and are also shifting more and more of their shopping online (eMarketer, 2005).

Women are playing online games? In a study conducted by Digital Marketing Service found that 43% of online gamers are women. Additionally the study found that females over the age of 40 spend the most hours per week play online games – nine hours compared to six hours for men over 40. Marketers have been positioning themselves to reach young men through entertainment-oriented messages and advertisements. But the second largest group of gamers (women) is almost invisible to advertisers (Oser, 2004). They represent a large and for the most part untapped demographic for advertising as well as reach potential.

One company has had success marketing to these female online gamers. Unilever, created a quiz that was considered an advergame. The game was created for Suave Naturals body washes and lotions. 5,000 people had taken the test in two months driven there strictly by media coverage for the Unilever products (Oser, 2004). Unilever is the same company that used online advertising for their Dove product and were able to show that the advertising not only had a positive effect on key metrics like brand awareness and purchase intent, but that it also created synergy with a traditional media budget (McDonnell, 2005). Unilever's Slim-Fast is also savvy when marketing to women on the Internet. The "Slim-Fast Challenge" an integrated campaign that used traditional and Internet channels brought Unilever a two-to-one return on the marketing investment (Overby, 2004). Unilever appears to be a savvy company when it comes to marketing their products through the Internet.

Reaching potential consumers through email is a benefit of the Internet for businesses. Advertisers use that potential to communicate with consumers, but men and women evaluate promotional emails differently. Where men and women differ is in the evaluation of information content as well as the visual presentation used in emails. Additionally, compared to their male counterparts' women are more concerned about privacy and preferred to use email to build relationships (Phillip, 2004). Businesses need to be aware that when emailing or marketing to women a "one size fits all" approach can be a costly approach.

The business of getting women to use a company's search engine on Internet can also be challenging. In the UK Google attracts 81% of online consumers to its search engine, but two-thirds of its users are males. Forrester Research suggests that Google should develop search help and communication enhancements to attract women (Omwando, 2004).

According to Nielsen/NetRatings the top five sites for women whose household income is \$150,000 are AOL Travel, Moviefone, AOL Living, Expedia, and AOL Entertainment. For men the top 5 are Fidelity Investments, Sabre Travel Network, CBS MarketWatch Network, United Airlines, and American Airlines. Men and women living in high income households share similarities in their preference for travel sites. But their differences are that men visit more financial sites while women were drawn more to entertainment sites (Nielsen/NetRatings, 2005). This report illustrates once again how men and women use the Internet differently to accomplish different tasks.

Men and women do use the Internet differently. But something they may have in common is multitasking. Once thought of as a more feminine trait Forrester Research reports that a majority of web, print media, television, and radio consumers are multitasking. Multitasking while consuming media is about equal among men and women and decreases with

age, and increases with income (Bernoff, 2004). Since there have been large increases in the amount of media consumed it only makes sense that multiple sources of media are consumed at the same time.

Americans spend on average nearly 14 hours online each month, which is close to the worldwide average according to Nielsen/NetRatings. Those living in Hong Kong surf the longest, each month nearly 22 hours. On the lower end, Italians on average log the least with just eight hours online during the month of the 12 countries studied. The report continues by explaining shifts in media consumption, steadily improving online offerings, and growing broadband penetration are factors in the growing number of online users on a global basis. Most of the 12 countries studied experienced double digit year-over-year growth (Nielsen/NetRatings, 2005).

Not only are consumers using the Internet more. Consumers are becoming more fully engaged with the Internet. In a recent Internet Deprivation Study conducted by Yahoo! And advertising agency OMD showed how difficult it is for consumer to go without the Internet. Participants were asked to abstain from using the Internet for two weeks and to keep a journal of their experience. In this study many participants express feelings of frustration and boredom. Participants said they felt disconnected from friends and family. In a related study conducted by Ipsos-Insight found that when consumers were asked to choose only one type of media to take with them to a deserted island a majority, 64%, choose a computer with Internet access (Buchwalter, 2005).

The latest research from Nielsen/NetRatings shows that travel sites attracted 2.2 million more women in February 2005 than in February 2004. Women now account for 49% of visitors to travel sites. Travel is one of the most successful categories on the Internet, the report



considers, because women value the speed and convenience of online shopping which allows for the ability to research destination and prices, check availability and finally to book travel (Nielsen/NetRatings, 2005).

Although research indicates a shrinking gap, little qualitative work has been done to evaluate women's attitudes. We know what they do but not why they do it and if they are satisfied.

### History of Uses and Gratification Theory

Herta Herzog is credited as the originator of uses and gratification, which was first used in the 1940s. She researched radio soap opera fans and what their motivations were listening to their shows. They included, "merely a means of emotional release," "the opportunities for wishful thinking," and the "advice obtained from listening to daytime serials." Herzog was interested in why women enjoyed soap operas. This is interesting in that Herzog was thinking of the audience. Other research at the time was questioning the effect soap operas had on the listeners which assumed that the audience was passive and the soap operas were doing things to the audience (Baran & Davis, 2003 p. 256).

Elihu Katz first named the uses and gratifications theory in an article in 1959, in which he responded to Bernard Berleson's suggestion that the field of communication research was dead. Katz was referring to newspapers when he argued that communication research at the time had been asking the question "What does media do to people?" Katz suggested that the discipline might do better to ask the question "What do people do with the media?" (Severin & Tankard, 1988/1997).

Wilbur Schramm asked the question, "What determines which offerings of mass communication will be selected by a given individual?" His answer became a formula that broke

down why people were interested in different forms of media. Basically, people make media choices determined by the expectation of the reward and effort required. (Schramm, 1954 p.19) For example, television is easier; there is little effort required – but the content may be lacking. The Internet takes thought and action, but content can be very diverse.

Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas (1973) saw the media as a way for individuals to connect or disconnect with others. Obviously they were not thinking of the Internet, but uses and gratifications theory had evolved at this point to include radio, newspapers, and television. They listed 35 needs and put them into five categories:

1. Cognitive needs (acquiring information, knowledge, and understanding)
2. Affective needs (emotional, pleasurable, or aesthetic experience)
3. Personal integrative needs (strengthening credibility, confidence, stability, and status)
4. Social integrative needs (strengthening contacts with family, friends, etc.)
5. Tension release needs (escape and diversion) (pp.164-181)

Uses and Gratification theory became unpopular with researchers because of perceived lack of science involved in it. It appeared to be too flowery, too arbitrary, and too descriptive. In the 1970s it came back into popularity out of basic need. Media had been studied repeatedly in many different ways but no new information was being gathered. Audiences had to be brought back into the mix. (Baran & Davis, 2003)

As explained by Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, “Though audience oriented, the uses and gratifications approach is not necessarily conservative. While taking account of what people look for from the media, it breaks away from a slavish dependence of content on audience

propensities by bringing to light the great variety of needs and interests that are encompassed by the latter.” Asking the traditional scientific questions was producing the same research over and over again. Researchers were not learning about why people were doing what they were doing.

Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch, said there were five assumptions of uses and gratifications:

1. The audience is conceived of as active; that is, an important part of mass media use is assumed to be goal directed.
2. In the mass communications process much initiative in linking need gratification and media choice lies with the audience member.
3. The media compete with other sources of need satisfaction.
4. Individual audience members can give data that will set up the goals of mass media.
5. Value judgments about the significance of mass communications should be suspended while audience orientations are explored on their own terms. (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974 p.27 - 33).

According to Lin, there are few true communication theories. Most have been borrowed from other fields of study. Uses and gratifications is a true communication theory with social psychological roots. The strength of this theory is to allow researchers to study communication from several sets of psychological needs, psychological motives, communication channels, communication content, and psychological gratifications within a particular context (Lin, 1996, p. 574).

According to the uses and gratifications theory, audiences differ in the gratifications they seek from the mass media. These differences are related to certain social conditions and or

personality dispositions. These differences result in many media use patterns and a variety of media effects. (Palmgreen, Wenner & Rosengren, 1985). Or said simply, everyone uses media differently, so everyone's experience is different. Viewers who were most active had the greatest expectation of gratification and also reported obtaining greater satisfaction. (Lin, 1993) This is interesting to media scholars and professionals because it tells us the more people use media the more they enjoy it and the more they want to use it; particularly with media that are active like the Internet.

### Criticisms of Uses and Gratifications

One criticism of the uses and gratifications approach is that it focuses too narrowly on the individual. Also, some studies show that exposure to media are not always purposeful or deliberate. People are often going through media on "automatic pilot" (Donohew, Nair, & Finn, 1984). This view suggests that people consume a great deal of mass communication at a low level of attention that might be labeled habitual.

Another criticism of uses and gratifications theory is that the audience is not always as active as was once originally thought, "a valid view of audience behavior lies between the extremes of being passive and expected to be influenced by the communicated messages and being active and expected to make decisions about what media content to accept and reject." (Rubin, 1993, p. 101).

Ien Ang criticizes uses and gratifications on three points: 1) it is highly individualistic, taking into account only the individual. 2) The social context of media use is ignored. 3) And so it overlooks the fact that some media use has nothing to do with gratification; it is forced on us. Researchers find out why people use the media, but do not know what the audience got out of the media use (Ang, 1990).

The main difference between the traditional effects theory and the uses and gratifications theory is that a researcher usually examines mass communication from the point of view of the communicator, the uses and gratifications researcher uses the audience member as a starting point. Windahl argues for a combination of the two approaches because it is better to highlight similarities than to focus on their differences. He coined the term “consequences of media content” and uses the term to categorize observations that are partly results of content use in itself and are partly results of content mediated by use (Windahl, 1981, p. 31).

### Uses and Gratification Theory Applied to the Internet

Uses and gratification theory allows us to study why women choose to use the Internet, and what reasons or needs they are attempting to gratify. The study of women’s use of the Internet would allow us to learn whether their needs are being gratified. In understanding whether their needs are gratified we will have a deeper understanding of what women use the Internet for, and how to improve the Internet experience for this section of society.

Uses and gratification theory looks at what people do with media and why. Uses and gratification research defines audiences as active. Earlier thinking asked, “What does the media do to people?” and generally assumes a homogeneous mass audience. By contrast, uses and gratifications allows for many responses and interpretations. Ruggiero argues “uses and gratifications has always provided a cutting-edge theoretical approach in the initial stages of each new mass communications medium.” (Ruggiero, 2000, p. 3). It may be argued, he continues, that computer-mediated communication has bolstered the potency of uses and gratifications by allowing it to stimulate research in telecommunications.

Ruggiero states that uses and gratifications’ core concepts are: interactivity, which is critical to the success of the Internet and creates active users; demassification, which is the

control the individual has over the medium; and asynchronicity which is the concept that senders and receivers of electronic messages can read mail at different times and still interact at their convenience. Most uses and gratification scholars agree that concepts such as an active audience have to be revised when applied to Internet communication. Reasons for using the Internet differ from person to person (Ruggiero, 2000).

So what are the reasons for using the Internet? An active audience is central to uses and gratification theory, and communication motives are key to audience activity. Studies have shown that communication is a major motivator for both men and women in using the Internet. In a study conducted by Papacharissi & Rubin (2000) a survey of 279 college students revealed uses and gratification theory's five motivations for using the Internet (ranked): interpersonal utility, seeking information, passing time, convenience, and entertainment. The Likert scale was used in Papacharissi & Rubin's survey. Papacharissi & Rubin's study illustrates the Internet's effect on the uses and gratification theory. Students used the Internet to fulfill needs. Quantifying uses and gratifications is difficult. Papacharissi & Rubin used the Likert scale to quantify the emotions behind Internet usage.

Weiser (2001) used uses and gratifications theory to study the function of the Internet and its social and psychological consequences. In the first study a total of 984 college students were surveyed. The Internet Attitudes Survey consisted of 19 statements assessing applications of Internet use. Each question was answered on a Likert scale. In the second study all data was collected via a WWW survey. In this survey 435 college students answered questions about: personal and professional Internet use, Internet attitudes, community and social involvement, social support, loneliness, depression, and life satisfaction. Each question was answered on a Likert scale. Weiser found that the Internet's social and psychological effects were dependant on

the user's reasons for using it. In other words, the Internet's social and psychological effect depends on the function it serves for the user. Subjects reported negative feelings related to social well-being. The subjects in the study that used the Internet for "goods and information acquisition" experienced a favorable effect on their psychological well-being.

Kaye and Johnson (2002) suggest that the uses and gratification theory is particularly well suited to studying the Internet. Through television, individuals can try to have their needs gratified by using the remote. But, online functions such as email, bulletin boards, and chat rooms require active users. In addition web surfers actively look for information by using links and search engines. Additionally, the vast amount of information available on the Internet should be able to fulfill many needs. Kaye and Johnson used an online survey to attract 308 web users. Using the Likert scale they questioned web use motivations, and political attitudes. Reasons for connecting to politically oriented sites factored into four motivational categories: guidance, information seeking/surveillance, entertainment, and social utility. Going on the Internet for entertainment information was not as strong a motivation as guidance and information seeking. These results were due to the nature of sites (political) that the subjects were visiting.

In a study that considered Internet motives and social networks, 336 young people between 15 and 21 were surveyed using Likert scales. Uses and gratifications theory was used to study: gender and education level difference in Internet use, social network predictors of loneliness, and to assess psychological factors which predict Internet motives. For this group of young people, Internet communications combined with lower face-to-face communication led to increases in loneliness. Gender and education level appeared to mediate these findings. Internet use was not predicted by wellbeing measures, but did highlight the need for face-to-face social relations for maintaining psychological health (Donchi, 2003).

In a case study that looked at uses and gratifications of people who visited an agnostic site, Richardson (2003) found the factors that motivate people to visit Agnostic Refuge an online discussion group for agnosticism. This exploratory case study analyzed the 1,849 archival postings December 1, 2002, through January 31, 2003, to the Agnostic Refuge. Immersed in these writings, Richardson revealed six uses and gratifications for posting on the Agnostic Refuge. Visitors were experiencing: wrangling, service, fulmination, understanding, tourism, and sanctuary. This study is interesting in that it used qualitative research methods in conjunction with the uses and gratifications theory for studying the Internet.

To summarize, the Likert scale via survey has been used with the uses and gratifications model to study the Internet. Information on seeking and or retrieval of information appears repeatedly as a primary gratification for Internet use. Whether looking for information on political candidates, agnostics, or an item that has been difficult to find, the Internet has functioned as a useful tool. Seeking out entertainment could also fall into this information seeking category. In the aspect of use as well as the others, the subjects overall appear to be gratified. Conversely, we have learned the use of the Internet does not satisfy attempts to overcome loneliness. Although we have learned a great deal about Internet uses there is a need to have a deeper understanding of uses and gratifications of the Internet. The Likert scale and like other quantitative research does not take into account emotions – including complex emotions that the Internet could bring up in subjects such as satisfaction or frustration regarding searches.

The Internet is still developing so we do not know how it will be categorized in the future. Because of its unknown quality it is important that media researchers study the Internet with a broad range of potential influencing factors. It is, after all, a new communication medium. It is important for mass communication scholars to gain a thorough understanding of just what is



leading individuals to use the Internet while it still is developing. To gain a deeper understanding of information sources and motivations for selecting a particular medium a number of communication models have been developed. Uses and gratifications, a theoretical model of communication, has experienced a resurgence due to its applicability to the Internet (Morris & Ogan, 1996).

Uses and gratifications theory has been used for radio, television, and now the Internet as each medium has emerged as a popular form of communication. It appears to be particularly well suited to studying the Internet which more than likely is the reason for this theory's resurgence in popularity.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How and why do women in the Boomer generation use the Internet at home? We will be conducting an exploratory study using the qualitative method of the in-depth interview.

## METHOD

In this exploratory investigation I hoped to uncover how women make sense of the Internet and, how women use the Internet. Additionally I hope to discover whether the uses that these women use the Internet for are gratifying experiences for them. Qualitative research was used to gain a deeper level of understanding. According to Strauss and Corbin qualitative methods can be used to explore substantive areas about which little is known or about which much is known to try to gain novel understanding. In addition, qualitative methods can be used to obtain the intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions which are difficult to extract or learn about through more conventional research methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Women's feelings towards the Internet were of great interest for this research. Whether the women's uses were gratified is in question regarding the Internet when employing the uses and gratifications model. Ruggiero states communication researchers should be encouraged to employ uses and gratifications more frequently in conjunction with qualitative methodologies in a holistic approach (Ruggiero 2000).

The method used here was a qualitative in-depth interview approach. No qualitative studies up to this point have been conducted on the gender differences of activities, attitudes, and usage of the Internet. A qualitative study can provide a richer and deeper level of understanding. Specifically in-depth interviews allow the participants to think, talk about, and talk out their thoughts and feelings on a given subject. In the past uses and gratifications research has relied on surveys which employ static scales to measure and categorize uses and gratifications. This study is a new way of looking at Internet usage.

Because the Internet is so entrenched in many people's lives, and a new medium, the in-depth interview gives the participants the opportunity to work out thoughts on a subject that they may not have given much thought before. Or, conversely, the in-depth interview allows people to express feelings on a subject (the Internet) that they have never been asked about previously. Given the exploratory nature of this research asking the participants directly about their Internet uses appeared the clearest route to gain this important information. Thus in-depth interviews were employed.

Grant McCracken says, "The long interview is one of the most powerful methods in the qualitative armory. For certain descriptive and analytic purposes, no instrument of inquiry is more revealing. The method can take us into the mental world of the individual, to glimpse the categories and logic by which he or she sees the world. It can also take us into the lifeworld of the individual, to see the content and pattern of daily experience. The long interview gives us the opportunity to step in to the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves" (McCracken, 1988, p.9).

To step into the mind of these women and to experience the Internet as they do themselves is precisely the reason for conducting this research through the in-depth interview. Because in qualitative research, the participants are the experts, the researcher does not go into the research with a hypothesis. Using the information shared by the participants allows the researcher to construct the codes based on the parameter of the women's experience.

In order to get the most information from the subjects they must be comfortable and in a natural setting. Computer usage is by its nature a solitary activity and lends itself to a personal interview. Focus groups or a "group mentality" can distract from the personal relationship the subject has with the Internet, which is at the very heart of what we were trying to uncover. Every

effort was made to interview participants in their primary computer usage with a focus on home usage.

Twelve in-depth interviews were conducted of baby boomer women born between 1946 and 1964 (age 41-59). The women were all residents of the south eastern region of the United States. Ten of the women interviewed were Caucasian, two were African American. One woman was retired, one was a homemaker, two were students, and the remaining eight were employed outside the home. Four of the women interviewed did not have children. Eight of the women interviewed had at least one child. The majority of women interviewed (ten) were married. Two of the women interviewed were not currently married.

The appendix A contains the interview questions, which outlines the basic questions and themes to be covered, and appendix B contains the consent form. Qualitative interview questions by their nature are broad, and open-ended. The interview questions were a tool fluid in its construction which allowed me, as the researcher, to adapt the interview questions based on the information received. Because of the fluidity of the tool, the questions served as a guide and each and every interview was unique. This fluidity allowed the themes to appear rather than having them forced on the participants. The qualitative research technique called snow balling was used to gather participants. This technique has participants referring new participants to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted to the point of redundancy.

## Data Analysis

All twelve interviews were recorded and transcribed for coding. Codes were expanded and collapsed based on the information and themes uncovered in the interviews. The interviewees themselves gave the information to set up the categories uncovered in the finding

section. All of the categories and themes appearing in this paper showed up in the majority of the interviews.

A qualitative research technique called axial coding was used. It is a process of creating categories and subcategories based on codes (themes) given by the participants. It is called axial because the codes are all built around the axis of categories. The purpose of axial coding is to reassemble data that was separated during coding; putting together similar themes helps to identify categories. Categories are related to their subcategories to form explanations about phenomena. The categories were considered saturated when no new information emerged from the coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

## FINDINGS

My findings are separated into three main areas: Uses – which include the information highway, connecting, and shopping. Gratifications – which include the convenience, control, and amount of time spent. Impediments – which include virus and spam, connection speed, information overload, and time and ability.

Through the process of the in-depth interviews (see appendix A for interview questions) interesting perceptions amongst the women interviewed surfaced. The women according to uses and gratification theory were having their needs gratified through a variety of uses.

### Uses

The Uses category in particular has been strongly supported and discussed by previous research such as, women use the Internet primarily for email (Weiser, 2000); (The Pew Internet, 2000) and (Sherman et al., 2000). However, communication is a major motivator for both men and women in using the Internet (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

Online research was a use for women (The Pew Internet, 2000) and (Sherman et al., 2000). But, information seeking is a primary function for getting on the Internet for both sexes (Kaye and Johnson, 2002) and (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000). Shopping was mentioned as more of a male function previously (The Pew Internet, 2000) and (Alreck, & Settle, 2002). This research showed women shopping online with great enthusiasm.

It is easy to see how the Internet would fulfill a research need. Additionally connecting with loved ones makes email extremely useful. The final critical use of the Internet was shopping.

## Information Highway/Searches

The interviewed women searched many topics from medicine, travel arrangement, children's school work, and their own school work and health research. Research was a critical use.

When asked what they use the Internet for one participant said, "Say, if I have problems with my kids, or if say even some type of medicine – or whatever – I will go (on the Internet) and search and look at it."

"Online banking, travel arrangements, research for planning travel – trying to determine where we want to stay when we go and all that kind of stuff,"

This participant had very clear objectives when asked what do you want from the Internet. "Research. Articles and the information. I want information. I want information – that's what I want."

"Information! Information – that's it. It (the Internet) truly is the information highway. You can get so deeply involved in doing research – you know there have been times when I have just gotten involved in something and printed out a ream of paper?"

"I can think through the years we have used it (the Internet) as a research tool, when my son went to school whenever he had things he was trying to research for papers or whatever we used it as a research tool."

"I mostly use the Internet to look up stuff. I want lots of good information."

"Anytime I go to it I want it to provide me with whatever I want. If I need a good price on a lamp for my living room, if I need a good price on a airline ticket, if I need to know how to get to a restaurant. I basically want it to provide everything that I ask it for."



“You know, back when I was in elementary school, high school, middle school a lot of research was done using (wow) encyclopedias. Now I’m really old! But later it became a lot more convenient to gather information through the Internet.”

“There is so much available. Like when I was sick. I found so much information about breast cancer, and every other kind of cancer. It gives me health information, gives me family information, you know fun stuff. So I guess what I want – I guess it depends on what you put into it – what you get out of it.”

When asked what do you use the Internet for, this mother used it to satisfy her child’s curiosity. “For example last night my son asked me what the retina did. He is 8. So we looked on the Internet about the retina and he got his information and was satisfied.”

“I use it (the Internet) to just look up things, all kinds of interests, and research. I just like all the materials and information out there for you to go ahead and get. So many resources – all areas.”

“Something that you are interested in – and being able to go further and dig deeper – that is probably that reporter/investigator thing and just want to know about it being able to do it at your own pace and time.”

When asked why did you first go on the Internet many women responded with personal things in which they were interested. This participant had just found out she was pregnant. “The first word I typed in (the Internet) was babies. And then search one of 68,000 found. And I was just amazed that there was that much information out there about babies.”

“I went to the St. Petersburg library Russia....I just thought this is so cool! That night, the first night I was on for 5 hours. And I was so excited about it.”

“Why did I first go on the Internet? I was looking for something to do with something for my kids.”

“Well I first got the Internet because I was in the master’s program at LSU – I was a part time student and it was easier to do work at home than it was to get to campus.”

“I would go to sites you know and look at the horoscopes each day and if I wanted some information say about my kids or whatever, different topics, I would go and search.”

“....emails, research, particularly right now, that’s the next thing is lots and lots of research. And then I’ve gotten more comfortable with that too, as far as figuring out where to go, that is most likely to yield what I am looking for or not. I’ve become more efficient at it and shopping. That’s probably top three.”

#### Connecting

Most women used email to connect with family and friends. For some women it was their preferred form of connecting with people.

Many participants felt very strongly about email. “Well, email is my preferred form of communication with anybody and everybody. I dread the phone because it’s an interruption to me....We got my 85 year old mother a computer 4 years ago and got her on email. We basically said do you want to communicate with your grandchildren? Then you will have to learn how to use email....And that’s how she likes to communicate with all of us too.”

(Email) “It helps me keep up with people that normally I don’t take the time to call – you know with email.”

“It is almost like email has become *the* form of communication. I think it is because of everyone’s hectic schedule. For me I don’t want to talk on the phone. It is easier for me to be

able to multi-task, sending out an email, checking this, answering a question from my husband, and playing with the dog.”

“I email that information to them so I know that they will have an electronic copy and they will also have access to the printed as well. So there is no reason – I always put on that return receipt on all of them so that I know they got it.”

“What is frustrating though is people who don’t have email. We live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century you need to have email. And you need to check it.”

Email was particularly important to those whose loved ones were far away. “...for my family and friends I tend to look at (email) like it’s a letter. So it will take me a few days sometimes to write back – which some of them are OK with and some it irritates.”

When asked what do you use the Internet for? The answer often came back email. “I have a son in Iraq and we email each support group back and forth. They are suppose to have access to email – but my son says it is very dangerous to get where the email is located. So we – the parents or mothers, or wives, or sisters, or whoever email each other back and forth, “I finally got a card it was post marked 35 days ago,” or “I received a call and so and so has lost their life.” Or “my child is real upset.” So that is a big part of my email from home.”

“I email generally to touch base with friends and family. Especially for family members that live far away and we don’t talk to or see often.”

“For staying in touch – sending notes, pictures, photos – and you don’t have to talk to people. It is definitely a benefit when you have constraints on your time – it can be a challenge – you work all day, you go home, you gotta do dinner, and hang out with the little one, and spend time with the spouse and talking on the phone is just like the last thing you have time to do. So email is a good way to do it.

“I’m finding that family are more apt to use emails and I’m actually more apt to use it to get in touch with them than with the phone or simply writing letters.”

Despite e-mail’s importance many women don’t have email at home. “I do correspond with some people that have both my emails at home and work. And sometimes I’ll do it from home instead of at work.”

“I use the Internet for email more than for other things. I use it for family and friends – but it is really more connected with my business associates. It is really more for work.”

“I don’t use email at home – and at work it is a function of my work.”

“I’m to the point that since living in Baton Rouge I have never had an email address at home. I always use my work email address.”

“I don’t have an active email account at home that I use. If I have someone that needs to send me an email I just tell them to send it to me at my work email address.”

### Shopping

Shopping refers to the Internet fulfilling a convenience need. Many women suggested shopping online was faster because they could shop when it was convenient to them, rather than when they could get to a store, and that they had a better selection when shopping online.

Referring to her use of the Internet one subject said, “the main function I think, I shop online, I have discovered that.”

This participant’s motivation for getting on the Internet for the first time was shopping, “Internet shopping – I would have to say that – if I remember correctly it was probably when my son was small and it just made more sense to try to buy things – you know when he was smaller it was easier to buy things on the Internet.”

“Every now and then, during the holidays I may get on there and place an order for a Christmas gift, or if there is somebody – the boss’s birthday or something.”

When asked what do you use the Internet for? One participant said, “....price comparisons for different things, shopping – you know the Christmas thing is big for me.”

“I do find that I do a lot of shopping on-line. Part of it is the convenience,”

“Basically that’s the way I shop most of the time now is through the Internet and I find that it’s very easy and you know I can do the shopping with my feet up and watching TV.”

“I use the Internet mostly for shopping and travel.”

Participants often used the Internet for a wide variety of shopping, “....everything from home decorating to clothes, my tickets,”

“....if I am shopping for something in particular I will go to the different stores to see what they actually have in that particular item.”

“Dresses if I want to shop or something like that.”

“We shop here at home too, a lot of wedding gifts from department stores and things.”

“I use it to find things at work for my people at work, to order things for the home, to make invitations and stuff for my kids, scrap booking, well right now we are doing band aid banquet getting ready for the banquet, business cards.

“I’ll order tickets to the Baton Rouge symphony – I’ve done that before.”

When asked what they use the Internet for travel often came up as a popular response. One subject said, “for travel if there is a destination I want to go to and I’ll look for stuff to do there or, you know, want to know more about a destination or a particular place – yeah, I’ll get on the Internet for that.”

“Not only do I buy my tickets, I have bought tickets for other people because I have friends that don’t have the Internet. Quite often they will call me to find out flight deals or car rentals I will do that or to find out new places – where to go.”

“I use it to buy plane tickets. I have done a fair amount of traveling in the past few years and – as long as I have had the computer at home I always buy my airplane tickets online I never use an agent anymore.”

“I only order over the Internet for airplane tickets.”

The convenience of the Internet to set up travel arrangements was not lost on the women interviewed. When asked what she used the Internet for this women said, “...travel arrangements, research for planning travel – trying to determine where we want to stay when we go and all that kind of stuff”

“Whatever I look for I’ve been able to find. No problems at all. I went on there and looked for my cruise – I’m not going until next year – but I am ready to go now. And I was able to find everything I needed.”

“I’ve used it for looking at vacation type things, making reservations, finding prices”

The convenience of using the Internet for finding directions also came up when discussing travel plans, “...finding new places having just moved to a new city and finding what’s available in a new city.”

“I found the map function, the directions, the Map Quest, and some of the others that they were very educating when I find places either around here or when I drove to Macon, Georgia.”

## Gratifications

Many women got on the Internet for the first time to gratify a personal need. Few of the interviewed women got on the Internet because it was a cool technology that they just wanted to

figure out. Instead, their motive was a personal use – often fulfilling a need for which they searched for gratification. Interestingly, the more that the women spoke of their uses of the Internet the more uses they thought of. This area illustrates very satisfied or gratified women with their Internet uses. There is more discussion of this later in the paper.

### Convenience

Convenience refers to the ease in which information on hobbies, and on random subjects is gratified. When referring to the Internet this participant explained, “Well I like it because it is so convenient. It saves huge amounts of time.”

“I have done a bit of research (using the Internet) for improvement project on different websites.”

“Every now and then I will go (on the Internet) look at the horoscopes if I am in the mood.”

“Sometimes we will get the weather information (on the Internet)”

“Typically I will get on (the Internet) at lunch just to see what the headlines are – just to read the headlines or check the weather stuff like that.”

“I use it (the Internet) sometimes if I want to go back and look at an article that was in the newspaper.”

“I play Tennis and our league is – the way you enter scores, find out about tournaments is all through the Internet. So that is mostly what I use the internet at home for – that’s a big usage.”

Even women who felt that they did not use the Internet that much expressed frustration at the thought of not having Internet access available. Many women they had not realized how much they used the Internet or how dependant they had become on it until they tried to imagine

life without Internet access constantly available. Participants in the study expressed frustration at the idea of not being able to access the Internet. The constant availability of the Internet allowed these women to jump on and check something quickly and go on to something else. The convenience of the Internet has permeated into these women's lives and many found it troubling to think of a time without the Internet.

Expressing frustration at the idea of not having Internet access for long periods of time a participant explained it this way, "Even though you don't use it (the Internet) a lot. It's like – I wouldn't be able to go do that if I wanted to go do that. I think it would be an inconvenience. It would be something that I would go out of my way to make access to some other way."

Referring to the idea of not have Internet service, one participant said, "I think I would get lost. I wouldn't know where to go all the time. I would not be able to help my friends out like I do now. I think it would be very frustrating."

"Oh, now that I have gotten used to it (the Internet) and it is convenient – that would be, you know, right up there with not having a telephone."

"It is so alarmingly frustrating and it is alarmingly frustrating because it alarms me that I am so frustrated about that. That we are in the instant gratification world right now because of Internet and email."

Referring to a recent time that her Internet service went down, one participant said, "I felt kinda lost. You know – frustrated. I use it so much for work so it was frustrating because there were things that had to get done and I couldn't get on at home so I had to go into the office."

One participant gave this example of frustration without the Internet. "The other day our neighborhood was struck by lighting so the power went out. It was awful! It wasn't so much that



I missed that we didn't have light. It was that I wanted my computer to work so I could do research. I don't care about light! Just get me power for my computer!"

### Control

Control refers to the Internet fulfilling a control need. Control is only second to convenience in needs gratified. Control was critical use for the women interviewed.

"I sometimes wonder if ordering online if it is really that much more time saving or that much more convenient. And really if you sat down and went through it the time is not the consideration it's a feeling of being more in control."

"Alan is doing all of the – we are about to buy another car – because we have been leasing and we are doing all of it online. All of it. We don't buy anything unless we research it online."

"I might look up something, and go and look at the prices – but if I am going to place an order I'll use the 800 number to call."

"What's funny is that if we see anything on the news, that interests us or any documentaries, or anything the first thing we do is Google it or go and look at it online to find out more about it."

"I go to the New York Times site or USA today, to get the news, national, international type stories."

### Amount of Time Spent

Another indicator of the women's uses being gratified is the amount of time spent online. This theme came as a surprise because previous research has suggested that women's frequency, intensity, and number of functions for the Internet was limited (Bimber, 2000) & (Ono & Zavodny, 2003).

“I use it maybe 6 hours a day. You are probably thinking, “what else does she do?”

“I use it for – you know it’s amazing when you think about how much I use it for! I guess I am really more of a computer geek than I ever thought.”

“I am always on the computer. The Internet is up and running throughout the day here – when I go home the first thing I do is take out the computer plug it in – hook it up – not necessarily get on the Internet right away but there is always at least something that I do on the Internet every night.”

One participant responded to a question about the set of her home computer this way, “We have two. But only one is connected to the Internet. So it is a constant challenge to share the one computer that is connected to the Internet.”

“My daughter – when she sees me get on the computer, “oh mamma don’t get on the computer” because she knows if I get on it one thing leads to another.”

“Well once I get into email everyone says “she’s on the computer again!” Cause I just start emailing. I mean ‘cause it’s interesting!”

“There are restraints on my free time because of how much I have to be on the Internet to get my homework done.”

“So I’m on either e-mail or the Internet probably 75% of the day.”

Many participants used the Internet equal or more than others in their household. This also came as a surprise due to previous research. When asked who in your household uses the Internet the most one participant responded, “That would be a tough one between Steve and me. I don’t know.”

“Actually, I am trying to think between Greg and I who would I say uses it more. I’d say our use is about the same.”

“My husband doesn’t even get on the computer at all. Not at all.”

“Who uses it the most? Me. He really doesn’t need the Internet just the programs that are one the computer.”

“Me. I am definitely on the Internet more than Charlie.”

“I use it the most at my house.”

## Impediments

Although the uses and gratification theory for the most part showed these women to be very gratified in their uses, there were hindrances to their gratification. Those impediments included: viruses/spam/pop-ups, speed, information overload/lack of control with searches, and time & ability. Issues with searches were the most common hindrance to gratification.

### Viruses/Spam/Pop-ups

The concerns with viruses/spam/pop-ups were a very common finding in this research. It is probable that these concerns are not unique to women in this demographic – although they may be more sensitive to issue. When discussing what do you use the Internet for this participant responded, “Typically I don’t like to go into my email at home because of the spam issue. It’s pretty bad.”

Additionally when asked if they had any frustrations with the Internet viruses/spam/pop-ups came in the discussion frequently, “I don’t want to have to guard my computer against viruses, hackers, people who steal my information, identity theft”

“Sometimes when I use the Internet I worry about viruses, and the privacy stuff.”

“I guess, spam, unwanted email and pop-ups. They annoy the hell out of me. I don’t like that. Especially anything that is going to block me as it comes up and I have to close it. If there is anything that obstructs my view – if I have to pop-up and close it – that annoys me.”

“Now I am starting to get pop-ups every time I go to the Internet. It is aggravating but I haven’t had the time to sit and deal with it because when you start on your computer digging into the detail, having to find problems you can spend hours and hours.”

#### Connection Speed

Speed of the Internet also was an impediment to these women getting what they wanted from the Internet. Speed frequently was mentioned as a frustration with the Internet. “Before high speed came into the picture to me it was just too stressful. But now it’s like no big deal.”

“It was dial-up – it was awful.”

“It’s really nice to have the high speed Internet as opposed to the dial-up. In the past we’ve gone through ages to get on then it would kick you off when you finally get on. Things have improved so much.”

“I don’t like anything that is going to take too long – so dial-up is not for me. That’s the reason I like high speed I think it is much, much better.”

“I wish – in my case I think and this has been my fault – because I haven’t really bothered to upgrade the connection – I don’t use it because it is monumentally frustrating with the dial-up and I haven’t really had the time to figure out what I am going to do for a faster connection.”

“I just got my computer cleaned by one of the guys at work and he said I have \_ a million bogus folders or something – I mean now it is just zipping by.”

#### Information Overload/Lack of Control with Searches

Information overload/lack of control with searches refers to impediments to gratification. Although the uses and gratification theory showed for the most part that these women were gratified in their uses there were hindrances on the Internet to their gratification. This category

shows the feeling of needs not being gratified which allows us to look into the women's world and see their experience.

Referring to frustrations with the Internet one participant said, "Definitely, I wish it was easier to find the stuff I am looking for – or is it just me?"

When asked do you find it difficult to find the information your are looking for many respondents expressed frustration. "Sure and it is probably operator error. Sometimes it just feels like you can't find...sometimes not always exactly what you want."

"It may be the way I'm searching, I may be too specific, but that gets a little frustrating. And then, so when you do change the way that you are searching it almost changes your goal or your topic sometimes. Sometimes that gets a little frustrating."

"Sometimes you are looking for something specific and it doesn't always appear. You have to try so many different things. Of course that takes up a lot of time too."

"The only thing I had to get better – I had to get better with keywords. Trying to find things to figure out what the – sometimes that can be difficult because you are not communicating."

"I was looking for a low carb bar and I ran a search – it sent me around the world looking for this low carb bar – and I finally found it at Amazon.com."

"There is too much information out there. I mean you go and look up something and it constantly leads you on and on and on to another."

"The hardest thing for me to get used to or to stop doing really was to think -- I initially I used to search it like it was just one giant library and now I get very frustrated when it doesn't function like that or I couldn't make it function like that."

“I think the normal person gets a lot of frustration with not being able to find something that they want, if they don’t know, and this happens to me a lot too. You know you will get Google up and you’ll search for a topic and then you’ve got to try and narrow that down and sometimes that’s very frustrating to figure out how to narrow what you want down.”

“If you can narrow it down enough you can usually find it through a search engine. Sometimes it’s a little bit frustrating.”

“Occasionally I’ll go to the help menu for searches but it tells me to make it a Boolean search and it is really all Greek to me. It’s not even helpful at all. I have gone to conferences where they had techniques on how to search the Internet – I guess my brain just isn’t wired.”

“Maybe if it (the Internet) were in categories so we could search easier without having to go through all of those different sites that might not be relevant to it.”

“I can generally find the information I am looking for. I’ve improved.”

Often the searches were for something personally significant. The inability to find what she was looking for was very memorable for this participant. “This is really stupid but I spent quite a bit of time one time trying to find orange wine glasses interestingly enough. We went to the University of Tennessee, I wanted orange wine glasses. And I mean I did every search I could think of you know, to find orange wine glasses, they apparently do not make orange wine glasses or at least their not on the Internet.”

### Time and Ability

Time and Ability refers to feeling that many women had when they weren’t using the Internet all that much or that other people (including their children) were getting a great deal more out of the Internet than they were. Although the women interviewed had their needs gratified with their Internet, they often experienced feelings of inadequacy as compared with

other people of their uses appear in this area. This is a particularly interesting finding when it is considered in the context of how much the participants were actually using the Internet, and how little the participants said they were using the Internet.

When asked if she was getting everything she wanted from the Internet this participant wanted to make clear that she was not the expert. “There are lots of things I don’t know about the Internet. My daughters do much, much better. I am just above functionally illiterate.”

“When I got my first computer my son was nine and he hooked everything up for me. I’m not that computer savvy.”

“It’s not sophisticated but I mean it is a pleasant (Internet) experience....I probably could make better use of it. We don’t tend to use it a whole, whole lot.”

“I am probably a boring Internet person. I don’t do anything extraordinary it’s just everyday functionality.”

“I also recognize that a lot of that has to do with me and my technology which is at the lower end of the spectrum right now.”

“My Internet experience is very limited.”

When asked if there are constraints her free time that limit her Internet use one respondent responded that there were “Constraints on my willingness to sit in front of a computer monitor at home.”

“It’s not like I can just sit there and go from one site to another, it’s just not my interest.”

I just don’t have time or the luxury to be that Internet junkie. That’s all. I have other activities, and obligations, and responsibilities I guess.”

“I would absolutely be on the Internet more and I would probably be looking up more things related to work if I had the time. And then also checking out some additional things for my son.”



## DISCUSSION

A qualitative assessment of women's use of the Internet in their home identified uses, gratification and impediments to their Internet use. Uses for the Internet fell into three general topics: searches, connecting, and shopping. According to previous research women use the Internet primarily for email (Weiser, 2000, The Pew Internet, 2000, & Sherman et al., 2000). Additionally, communication is a major motivator for both men and women in using the Internet (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

Online research also came up in previous research as an Internet function for women (The Pew Internet, 2000) and (Sherman et al., 2000). Information seeking is a primary function for getting on the Internet for both genders (Kaye and Johnson, 2002) and (Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000).

Shopping was often mentioned more of a male function in previous research (The Pew Internet, 2000) and (Alreck & Settle, 2002). This research showed women shopping online with great enthusiasm.

Gratifications for uses of the Internet also fell into three general topics: convenience, control and amount of time spent. An indicator of the women's uses being gratified is the amount of time spent online. This theme was surprising due to previous research has suggested that women's frequency, intensity, and number of functions for the Internet was limited (Bimber, 2000) and (Ono & Zavodny, 2003).

Impediments for gratification fell into four general topics: viruses/spam/pop-ups, connection speed, information overload/lack of control with searches, and time/ability. Although viruses/spam/pop-ups, connection speed, and information overload/lack of control with search seem to be common general complaints with the Internet, the time/ability section was of great

interest. After spending a great deal of time expressing their lack of time and ability on the Internet most women came back to the discussion with a great number of uses and web sites, and gratifications that were being served. Not only were the women using the Internet more than I had originally thought, but they were using it with greater sophistication, and intent than I had ever suspected.

Many women expressed they did not use the Internet all that much only to come to realize that they were using it a great deal more than they initially thought. Although the perception was that the women being interviewed weren't using the Internet very much they were actually using it a great deal. Many of the women interviewed spoke of how they didn't use it all that much – only to turn around and explain how much they use it, what great sites they visit, and how the Internet functions in their day-to-day life. They went on to express plans on how they would access the Internet if it were not as readily available as it is now.

This apparent conflict may explain why some previous quantitative studies show women using the Internet less than men. The women of this study began by saying how little they used the Internet almost as a reflex reaction. It was my impression that these women did not want “over sell” their Internet experience – so they actually did the opposite, and undersold their Internet knowledge. Only after they warmed up to the subject of their Internet use through the interview process, spoke for a while, and realized that they had something to say, did they begin to realize how much they actually did use the Internet.

Many women that were interviewed got on the Internet for the first time to gratify a personal need for information. Their first experience was often motivated because they wanted to look up information from their personal lives. The interviewed women did not get on the Internet because it was a hot new technology that they just had to figure out. They were not attracted to

the Internet because of its techie quality. Rather their motive was a personal use – often fulfilling a need for information that they were attempting to gratify.

Women have, to some extent, become dependant on the Internet for searches, connecting and shopping and would be very frustrated without it. Several women gave examples and plans of how they would actively search out Internet access if it were not readily available to them.

## Practical Applications

One possible application of this research would be for marketers of Internet services. To overcome the perception of boomer women not using the Internet all that much, it would be beneficial to paint a picture of the world without the Internet, and more specifically a woman's life without the Internet. This research found that many women do not realize how much they are on the Internet or how dependant they are on the Internet. To sell Internet access it would helpful to illustrate this point to help women realize how much they already do use the Internet, as well as possible uses that may be gratified in the future. Marketers could also tap into the frustration that many women expressed at the thought of not having easy Internet access available. The emotion of frustration would be another way to illustrate this point.

When marketing to women it is important to remember their use of the Internet is personal. These women did not go on the Internet because of technology, or a potential cool factor. These women chose to go on the Internet for the first time because they personally wanted to know something, often for their children. The motivation to go on the Internet was not simply because it was there. It was a choice to go on in an attempt to understand something else that was going on in their lives. At that point the Internet became a useful tool to gratify their needs.

Previous research has illustrated the important use of Internet research. This is an important topic for these women as well. But it is also important to note that the ability to control their Internet experience as well as the convenience of the Internet experience was also very important to these women. These benefits of the Internet (control, and convenience) have not been as widely touted as the research factor and are critical to understanding these women's gratification on the Internet.

An areas where needs were not being gratified were searches. Searches came up time and time again as a hindrance to gratification. Several women talked of personalized content as a possible solution.

"I guess I would like to be able to just hop on a website that I use all the time and just know that what I am looking for is just going to come right up. Or things you know – you have searched lately, oh here is something new that has come up like the things you have searched before – and it's on sale."

"It would be nice if I logged on that it would pull up things that I am interested in. And if Charles logged on it would automatically pull up those things that he is interested in. That would be kinda cool."

A trusted website that offered personalized content would increase the level of satisfaction with the Internet as well as increase the confidence of the women in the Internet to fulfill needs.

This area of personalized content would fulfill and a need that is not being gratified by the Internet. Designers of web pages would do well to create more personalize portals remembering women's preferences and past searches.

Other areas where needs were not being gratified were spam, pop-ups and viruses. Many Internet access companies are now offering at least partial solutions to these issues. Our research here shows that these companies are headed in the right direction and should tout their offerings and try to educate their consumers. This section of the population is very concerned with these Internet issues and would be greatly interested in any progress being made to eliminate them.

A possible limitation of the findings is that two of women interviewed were graduate students. This would not be typical of this demographic normally. Despite this the researcher found that their concerns and use of the Internet was quite typical of the rest of the interview base and does not feel that this altered the findings in any way.

Additional research inquiring on men's uses and gratifications of Internet use would be helpful to illuminate whether this is a generational subject or a gender subject. Follow up research of different generations of women as they enter their 40s would also be interesting to see how women's relationship to the Internet changes based on when in their lives they were introduced to it. Hypothetically Generation X will have a different relationship with the Internet than the Boomers, and the Millennials will have a different relationship than the Gen X'ers. Once a generation that has been raised with the Internet hits forty all subsequent generations should have similar relationships with the Internet. At some point in the not too distant future the Internet will become as deeply ingrained in our culture as television. It is possible based on the needs to be gratified that the Internet could become more ingrained than television. That too would be interesting research.

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## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

RQ1: Why did you first go on the Internet?

Probe: When was that?

RQ2: Tell me about how you use the Internet?

Probe: Is your Internet use different at work than at home?

Probe: Do you have frustrations with the Internet?

RQ3: When do you use the Internet?

RQ4: What do you use the Internet for?

Probe: Tell me about your email correspondence.

Probe: What kinds of information do you look up on the Internet?

RQ5: In 5 words describe your Internet experience.

RQ6: How much do you use the Internet?

Probe: Are there constraints on your free time that limit Internet use?

RQ7: What is the set up of your home computer?

Probe: What room in the house is it in?

Probe: Who in your household uses it the most?

RQ8: What do you want to get from the Internet?

Probe: Do you find it difficult to find the information you are looking for?

RQ9: Has there ever been a long period of time when you had to go without the Internet?

Probe: How did that make you feel?

RQ10: What would you like to get from the Internet?

## APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

### Women's use of the Internet

Study will be conducted in homes or place of business.

Rachelle Powell (225) 275-8202 will be conducting the interviews.

The purpose of this study is to discover women's uses of the Internet.

Women of the baby boomer generation who use Internet in their home will be interviewed. Any person not fitting into these criteria will not be interviewed. A maximum of 25 interviews will be conducted.

A personal in-depth interview consisting of questions about Internet use will be conducted. Interviews potentially could be several hours long.

No benefit or risk is associated with this study.

Participation in the study is voluntary. Subjects may change their mind and withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they may be otherwise entitled.

Every effort will be made to keep data confidential through coding. Data will be kept confidential unless release is legally compelled.

Subject may withdraw at any time for any reason prior to the submission of the paper. Investigator will remove individuals from the study without her consent only when the subject does not fit into subject's criteria.

The study has been discussed with me and all my questions have been answered. I may direct additional questions regarding study specifics to the investigators. If I have questions about subjects' rights or other concerns, I can contact Robert C. Mathews, Chairman, LSU

Institutional Review Board, (225) 578-8692. I agree to participate in the study described above and acknowledge the researchers' obligation to provide me with a copy of this consent form if signed by me.

Subject Signature

Date

## APPENDIX C: SALIENT RESEARCH

### Salient Research Conducted in this Field

Authors	Year	Method	Population	Key Finding
Weiser	2000	survey	506 undergraduate college students	The gender gap appears to be rapidly diminishing. Several gender difference were mediated by differences in age and Internet experience
Sherman et al.	2000	survey	889 undergraduate college students	Difference between men and women's participation were not smaller among younger respondents. Men used the technology more often and had a more positive attitude about the experience than women. Sherman's findings contradict those of Weiser.
Bimber	2000	phone survey	3032 adults around the U.S.	Gender gaps exist in access and use. Women's intensity of use remains less than men's.
The Pew Internet	2000	daily tracking survey	1690 persons with Internet access were interviewed	Women's motives for using the Internet are different than men's. What women are doing on the Internet also appears to be different.
Alreck and Settle	2002	survey	600 consumers	Internet shopping is the only area where women were not more positive about shopping than men.
Shaw and Gant	2002	questionnaires	46 undergraduate college students	There was no difference in Internet use or the way Internet affects users when comparing genders.
Porter and Sallot	2003	email survey	432 public relations professionals	There was no difference in Internet use when comparing genders at work
Ono and Zavodny	2003	survey	50,000 Current Population Survey	Gender differences are stabilizing. Women continue to trail in number of uses, as well as frequency and intensity.

There is some indication that the gender gap is lessening among younger users. There are however holes in the body of knowledge. There is a need for additional research among older Internet users. Much of the research to date has been focused on college students.

## VITA

Rachelle Powell's interest in the internet is more than academic. For the past 3 years she has been employed by Cox Communications as the High Speed Internet Marketing Manager in Baton Rouge. There she has researched and marketed the impact of broadband internet on the general population. Prior to internet marketing Rachelle had positions marketing cable, diode lasers, pools, radio stations, and buying clubs. The degree of Master of Mass Communication was received by Rachelle August 2005.