

**A Uses and Gratifications Approach: Understanding Prospective Graduate Students Needs
on U.S. University Websites**

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Abstract

This research study proposal examines the needs of prospective graduate students and their fulfillment with the information they find when visiting university graduate school program websites in the United States while making their application and enrollment decisions. The theoretical approach of this study utilizes the uses and gratifications theory (U&G) to understand the specific needs and how graduate program webpages meet them. This research aims to provide a more detailed understanding of how these websites can satisfy the needs of prospective students in the future. With research questions centered around gratification, the study will provide insights into said gratifications and potential themes to increase future student satisfaction. A qualitative study design will allow prospective student data collection through interviews to answer the research questions. This study could provide actionable insights for universities to align their websites to attract and retain prospective graduate students to increase enrollment.

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Colleges and universities across the United States have experienced a decline in undergraduate enrollment projected to continue while graduate enrollment continues to increase to provide enrollment growth opportunities for institutions (RNL & Plexuss, 2021). A recent Gallup poll found that “Americans’ confidence in higher education has fallen to 36%” (Brenan, 2024). Additionally, search engines, college search sites, and program ranking websites are used by over 75% of prospective graduate students to begin their research (RNL & Plexuss, 2021). Regarding content, “graduate students prioritize information on cost and academics when visiting institutional websites” (RNL & Plexuss, 2021). With distrust and a demographic cliff looming for undergraduate education, it is critically important that colleges and universities align their graduate program websites to assist prospective graduate students during their graduate education search.

This study utilizes U&G theory to understand the gratifications future students aim to fulfill and how well current graduate program websites meet these needs. The purpose of this research study is to explore U&G among prospective students considering graduate education in the United States and provide key takeaways to higher education marketing professionals and enrollment management leaders. At this stage in the research, a U&G theoretical approach will be generally defined within the context of website content needs and motivations and how well those gratifications are being met by university graduate program websites.

Literature Review

The theoretical framework of this study utilizes the uses and gratifications theory or approach (U&G) to understand the needs of prospective graduate students as they are searching

for their top-choice institution that aligns with the next step in their education journey. Katz et al. (1973) introduced U&G and further defined how it can be used to understand the reasoning of why individuals gravitate towards certain media types to satisfy their needs. U&G aims to connect not only the media patterns of individuals but also to understand the gratifications associated with media consumption and how individuals are not passive in this process (Katz et al., 1973). Five categories were coined by Katz et al. (1973) to describe the needs: cognitive, affective, social, personal, and escapism. This research was expanded by Ruggiero (2000) to reframe U&G within the media landscape that, over two decades later, includes social media, smartphones, laptops, internet access, virtual assistants, and more. Ruggiero (2000) reiterates the importance of U&G in 21st-century media but adds that additional gratifications, like interactivity, will likely continue to add to the approach. With motivations remaining fairly consistent, U&G is a helpful tool to better understand the fulfillment of future graduate students in their search process on university websites.

Many studies have used qualitative and quantitative methods to explore social media and social networking sites (SNS) with U&G as a lens. Previous qualitative research suggests a key motivation for social media use is linked to social interaction and connection ("So why do people use Facebook and Twitter?", 2015; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Quantitative studies demonstrate a connection between how specific SNSs meet varying user needs and provide different gratifications and include the development of a new scale to understand affordance-driven U&G on SNS (Phua et al., 2017; Rathnayake & Winter, 2018). Literature exists within the context of current college students' social media U&G, however, few studies incorporate the prospective student audience for universities in the United States (Florenthal, 2015; Murray, 2013; Perera et al., 2022). While social media is not a higher education website, it is important to acknowledge

the large amount of U&G research in application to social media and how these concepts may be related.

Finding the right messaging and media in higher education enrollment management is critically important. Goodrich et al. (2020) used psychographic measures to uncover a deeper understanding of prospective students' motivations to recommend appropriate targeting and media placements. Survey data and analysis demonstrate the importance of higher education websites as the study found that "students' usage of university websites is higher (76.1%) than online advertising (21.20%) and social media (19.20%)" (Goodrich et al., 2020). Though limited to undergraduate prospective students, studies indicate content that engages the visitor is more likely to enhance perceived fit which could be connected to the U&G approach (Cassar & Caruana, 2023; Ihme et al., 2016).

Regarding graduate education websites, limited studies specifically utilized U&G. However, graduate program website studies that focused on the experience of prospective doctoral students in specific programs measured this through surveys, eye-tracking, and exit interviews (Huang & Bilal, 2019; Sundeen et al., 2015). Both studies mention a substandard user experience that could be improved by a closer look at the information architecture and content prospective students find helpful in their decision process (Huang & Bilal, 2019; Sundeen et al., 2015). In understanding previous studies of U&G in higher education and the need for additional research in the graduate education space, the following research questions are proposed:

RQ1: When exploring university graduate program websites, what gratifications do prospective graduate students aim to fulfill?

RQ2: How well do current U.S. university websites meet the needs of prospective graduate students?

Proposed Method

A qualitative approach will be utilized in this study to explore the needs and fulfillment of prospective graduate students on their university website experience. Daymon and Holloway (2010) note that “interviewing involves participants and interviewers in a form of social interaction through which they collaborate to produce meaningful, situated accounts of participants’ experiences” which will allow for a deeper level of understanding and probing questions related to U&G that potentially would be lacking through a questionnaire (p. 220).

Participants

In this study, sampling will be utilized to recruit 20-25 participants considering enrollment in a graduate degree program in the United States. LinkedIn and graduate admissions offices will be the primary methods for recruiting participants through targeted messages that outline the purpose of the study. The researcher will aim to have an even representation of genders from varying geographic locations and regions that reflect the diverse student bodies and university programs mentioned. There will also be a balance of future students searching for a master’s degree versus a doctoral program and a mix of hybrid, online, and in-person program interests. Individuals searching for a graduate certificate will not be included in the study. No compensation will be provided for participation in the study.

Design

To fully digest the in-depth interviews, thematic analysis will be used to identify themes from the data related to U&G and the RQs. The interviews will be semi-structured to allow for probing questions where appropriate. A sample interview guide (see Appendix) is provided and will include questions about needs, user experience, and fulfillment with website content.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews will be approximately 40 to 60 minutes via a secure Zoom connection to accommodate the varied locations of the participants. Before the interview begins, participants will have provided their consent for the study which includes language informing them that the Zoom will be recorded, stored securely, and transcribed using pseudonyms. Participants will be instructed to speak freely and openly regarding their experience using graduate program websites during their graduate school search process. Candid feedback will be encouraged. Once the interviews are complete, the researcher will anonymize the transcript, repeatedly read it, and print the transcripts to begin coding the data into themes. These themes will be analyzed through the lens of U&G and the RQs to provide patterns that will aim to inform key takeaways for enrollment management professionals and university leadership regarding the importance of graduate program websites.

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Appendix

Sample Semi-Structured Interview Questions

Date:

Interviewer:

Start and End Time:

1. Background

A. Demographics

- What is your preferred gender, age, and current place of residence?
- What is your most recent educational degree that is in progress or that you completed?
- What graduate programs are you interested in? Do you have any specific universities that you are considering applying to or have applied to?
- Do you have a specific delivery style that you are leaning toward (in-person, online or hybrid)?

B. Website

- During your search, do you have a preferred device type that you typically use (laptop, tablet, smartphone, virtual assistant, etc.)?
- How frequently, if at all, are you using graduate program websites on the university website (.edu) to assist in your graduate education search?

2. Prospective Graduate Student Needs

A. What led you to start looking into graduate education?

B. What tools did you use to find information on graduate programs?

C. What specific information do you prioritize or find most helpful on graduate program websites?

- Why is this information important to you?
- Does this information impact your decision to apply?

3. Prospective Graduate Student Gratifications

A. Cognitive - What key information is most important for you to learn about a program?

- What do you want to understand about the programs?

B. Affective - How do you feel as you explore and search these program websites?

C. Social - What social or connection information do you look for on these program websites?

(Student/alumni/faculty testimonials and/or stories, program ambassador contact information, program director information, forums, etc.)

- Why are these important to you?

D. Personal - How do university websites typically align with your values or aspects of your identity?

- How important is that to you?

E. Escapism - Do these websites help you picture your next step in graduate school or serve as a way to escape current stressors?

- If so, in what ways does the website do that?

4. Prospective Graduate Student Experience and Gratification Fulfillment

A. How user-friendly do you find the websites when looking for information you are trying to find?

B. What content do you find to be the most helpful?

C. How satisfied are you with your interactions and experiences on these graduate program websites?

D. Could you describe any memorable experiences you have had?

- These can be positive, negative, or both.

E. How satisfied are you with your interactions and experiences on these websites?

- Do you have any suggestions for universities to enhance their graduate program websites?

5. General Follow-up Questions

A. Are there any other additional thoughts that you would like to share?