Need For Closure and Media Use and Preference of Young Adults

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This study examined the effects of Need for Closure (NFCL) on use and preferences for (un)structured, (un)predictable and (un)traditional media, genres and channels in 1350 young adults. High and low NFCL respondents spent equal time on cognitive undemanding media (TV, radio, music). However, high (versus low) NFCL respondents engaged less in cognitive effortful media (newspapers, Web). Moreover, respondents with a similar NFCL preferred a similar scope of genres and channels. More specifically, high NFCL respondents preferred well-respected, conventional and less cognitively stimulating genres and channels. Low NFCL respondents preferred alternative, non-conformist, critical and intellectually stimulating genres and channels.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

According to the uses and gratifications approach (Blumer and Katz 1974), people make different media choices depending on personal characteristics. Previous research points out that people use different media depending on their personality (Henning and Vorderer 2001; Kraaykamp and Van Eijck 2005; Persegani et al. 2002; Weaver 2003). People gravitate to particular kinds of media because they have particular personality characteristics, issues and/or needs that are either reflected in the media they choose or that the medium satisfies. Kraaykamp and Van Eijck (2005) suggested that personality is linked to a more general preference for more predictable, simple media types on the one hand versus more cognitively stimulating or unconventional media types on the other hand. In this respect, the personality characteristic Need for Closure (NFCL) seems very relevant. The need to obtain closure is related to cognitive processing and the approval of conservative, traditional ideas (Webster and Kruglanski 1994). Since different media and different genres and channels demand a different cognitive capacity and differ in predictability and traditionalism of ideas, NFCL can be expected to be related to the preference for specific media, genres and channels. In view of the potential relevance of the Need for Closure and the fact that NFCL has not been linked yet with media and program preferences, the objective of the current study was to shed some light on the relation between personality and preference for (un)structured, (un)predictable and (un)traditional media and genres by incorporating NFCL.

The personality characteristic Need for Closure (NFCL) reflects the desire for clear, definite, or unambiguous knowledge that will guide perception and action, as opposed to the undesirable alternative of ambiguity and confusion (Kruglanski 1990). A high NFCL is a motivation to draw a conclusion quickly and terminate cognitive processing related to the issue (Webster and Kruglanski 1994). High NFCL individuals neglect new, alternative information and views different from their own because high accessible structures (like pre-existing knowledge structures or stereotypes) afford immediate closure (Ford and Kruglanski 1995). Low NFCL individuals are sensitive to new, alternative information and competing, divergent views when closure is “in danger” of forming. The main idea behind the NFCL theory is that individuals with a high NFCL level experience a negative feeling when closure is threatened and a positive feeling is evoked when closure is attained or facilitated. The motivation to avoid these negative feelings prompts activities aimed at the acquisition of closure and consequently biases the individuals choices and preferences toward closure-bound pursuits (Kruglanski and Webster 1996).

Based on previous research on NFCL on the one hand and the characteristics of particular media types on the other (TV viewing and listening to the radio are cognitively less demanding, more predictable and linearly structured compared to leisure activities like reading and Web surfing (Eveland and Dunwoody 2002, Eveland 2003, Spencer, Seydlitz, Laska and Triche 1992)), we expect that high (versus low) NFCL individuals watch more TV, listen more to the radio and to music, read less magazines and newspapers and spend less time surfing the Web. Furthermore, we expect that young adults with the same NFCL level have a preference for similar scopes of channels and genres across media. More specifically, we argue that high (versus low) NFCL individuals prefer more structured, predictable and traditional channels and genres.

In total, 1350 young adults (age between fifteen and twenty four), who were randomly addressed in a shopping mall or street, agreed to complete our questionnaire containing questions on their media behavior and need for closure levels. Furthermore, a panel of three independent judges who were unaware of the subject of the study, rated the newspapers, TV channels, radio channels, magazine types, TV program genres and music styles listed in the questionnaire on the degree of cognitive stimulation, conven- tionality and predictability by (α=.82).

Statistical analyses showed no significant difference for the amount of watching TV, listening to the radio or to music on weekend or weekdays, while significantly more low NFCL respondents read newspapers, read them on a more regular basis, are more likely to use the Web, use it more frequently and have a longer history with Web surfing. Furthermore, high NFCL individuals have a higher preference for light entertainment and TV guides; national music, and pop music, whereas low NFCL individuals prefer fiction, general news, science and alternative information/entertainment magazines, and alternative and street music. Moreover, high (versus low) NFCL individuals have a higher preference for more popular and straightforward newspapers, and vice versa for intellectual and alternative newspapers. Finally, high NFCL individuals rank ordered commercial, family TV and commercial pop/techno or family radio higher, whereas low NFCL consumers assigned a higher rank to intellectual and comedy/movie related TV channels and alternative or classical radio.

These results confirmed that high NFCL individuals are in favour of popular, straightforward, cognitive less constraining genres irrespective the medium that is under consideration, whereas low NFCL individuals prefer alternative, unpredictable, and intellectually stimulating things regardless the medium.

In general, our results show that the content of the medium is important rather than the delivery system. Although previous research would suggest that the choice of a particular medium is personality driven (e.g. Finn 1997; Henning and Vorderer 2001), it seems like different personality types can satisfy their needs in similar media (cfr. Cohen 2002; Schwartz and Fouts 2003; Weaver, 2003), McIlwraith (1985) also concluded that personality and preferred media content are associated rather than the particular medium (movies, books and music). Both the rejection of our “medium related” hypothesis and the confirmation of our “content related” hypothesis suggest that the medium itself has little to do with cognitive processes. Rather, the same medium could satisfy the needs of different personality types through very different content.

References


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