

**CONFESSING IN CYBERSPACE:
FRAMING RESEARCH OF A TURKISH CONFESSION WEB SITE,
*ITIRAF.COM***

CHRISTINE L. OGAN, Ph.D.

*Indiana University
(U.S.A)*

Abstract

This paper conceptualizes the study of a web site based in Turkey that has become enormously popular in the three years of its existence. Despite a low Internet penetration rate in the country, the site daily attracts about 55,000 visitors and submission of between 800 and 1000 confessions. This paper frames the research of this site in social and religious ways and discusses how uses and gratifications research, somewhat reconceived to apply to research of Internet genres, could be used to determine why the site has sustained such popularity.

**CONFESSING IN CYBERSPACE:
FRAMING RESEARCH OF A TURKISH CONFESSION WEB SITE,
*ITIRAF.COM***

The Internet has brought us a variety of new opportunities for communication. Several types of interactivity can be found on news and information web sites. There are also opportunities to communicate with businesses through a range of e-commerce activities—ordering, selling, and trading. For communication that simulates face-to-face conversation, we have chat rooms, ICQ, and instant messaging systems. But who would have dreamed that the web could also function as a place to confess your sins, from the most trivial embarrassing moments to adultery, theft and homicidal feelings? This paper is about one of those web sites—specifically, Itiraf.com, an incredibly popular web site based in Turkey, that attracts about 55,000 users daily and receives from 800 to 1000 confessions from those users each day, publishing only a fraction of what is received. It has even spun off a book by the same name, and is arguably the most popular web site in Turkey. There are also several counterparts to this site in the United States, though none appear to be as well trafficked. In fact, itiraf.com began its own U.S. site in English, confideinme.com, in July 2002 and was forced to close it within two months due to lack of interest. This paper will treat the issues raised by this form of computer-mediated-communication. It will also discuss a framework for analysis of use of a single type of web site, rather than examining the Internet as a whole.

About itiraf.com

The site is the brainchild of Ersan Özer, a young man who graduated in 1993 with communication degree from Eskişehir University. After several years of working in print and broadcast media he started to pay attention to the Internet and the potential of the size of its audience. Work he did for the popular Turkish television program, “Televole,” where celebrities’ stories are aired, led him to think that if audiences liked hearing the real life stories of celebrities, they might also be interested in hearing the stories told by ordinary people. So on October 22, 1999, he registered the itiraf.com site and began working on it at night after work. Because he worked in mass media, when his friends started to talk about it, word got around. One of those friends was a reporter at one of the largest circulating dailies, Hürriyet, wrote a story about the site. At the end of the first year, itiraf.com was drawing 10,000 unique visits a day; the end of the second year saw 30,000 users; and now the number has jumped to about 55,000 or more on most days and at least 200,000 unique visits per month. Each day the site posts the number of page views, unique visitors, and confessions received for the previous day. Itiraf.com has by now become a brand that is well known. Other media—newspapers and television channels—have tried to copy its format but have not been successful. After three months online, Özer was bought out by Elektronik Bilgi Yayıncılık, which owns other large e-commerce sites and portals. Despite its popularity, itiraf.com did not become profitable until the beginning of 2002. (Özer, July 1, 2002). Invested in this site on both an economic and personal level, Özer believes that the information people post there reflects Turkish society in the 21st Century—in fact he has subtitled the site, “the school of life.” Though skeptics say that he makes up the confessions, Özer claims that he never did that, and even in the beginning when few confessions were submitted, he would ask his friends to contribute rather than provide fictional ones. Özer

said that the regulars on the site have established a community—he calls it a family—and that they even have developed their own language.

Online surveys of the site's users have yielded responses from a range of people (from 3,088 responses to the question related to their gender to 8,902 responses to a question asking about what model car they drive, if any). In a survey conducted in April and May 2002, a demographic profile of users revealed the following:

- Gender: 56.7% male. That percentage has fluctuated in the three years since the site began—from 51% to 54% to the current percentage in the years since the site has been up.
- Education: 61.4% high school graduates, university students, or university graduates.
- Internet Connection: 63.6% are able to connect from home while another 20.5% can connect from work. Marital Status: 76.09% are single. Age: 63.99% are between the ages of 16 and 25 while the next largest age group is between 26 and 35 (25.03%).
- Place of residence: 41% live in Istanbul; 18% live in Ankara and 12% live in Izmir. These are the three largest cities in Turkey.
- Newspapers read: The largest percentage (27%) read the popular daily, *Hürriyet*. While 16% read the conservative paper, *Zaman*, and 11% read the liberal *Cumhuriyet*.
- Political Affiliation: In a poll taken on the site right before the November 3 elections, nearly 11,000 people responded to the question about who they planned to vote for. The somewhat left of center *Cumhuriyet Halk Partisi* (Republican People's Party) received 36% of the responses while the *Adalet ve Kalkinma Partisi* (Justice and Development Party) received 20%. The remaining 16 parties received from 0 to 7% of the responses. *The New York Times* reported on October 31, 2002 that the AK Partisi was expected to receive 30% of the votes while the RPP was running second, however (Fisher, p. 3).
- Frequency of use: An October 2002 survey shows that 79% of respondents go to the site every day, and another 10 percent use it several times a week.
- E-commerce use: 71% of respondents have never shopped on line. Access from other countries: 1,868 respondents claim to access the site from various European countries or elsewhere, while 30% of those access from the United States.
- Ownership of car: Only 27% of the respondents do not own any vehicle.
- Wish to emigrate: 45% of the respondents say they would go to the U.S. to live, given the current situation in Turkey

Turkey's Technology profile.

Turkey is a country with a population of about 68 million where about three-quarters of that population lives in urban areas. The GDP per capita was about \$6870 at the end of 2001, but there is a great economic divide between rich and poor in the country. About 28 telephone lines per 100 people exist in the country, while there are 10.64 Internet hosts per 10,000 people. However, many people access the Internet from the same host—28.60 per host at the end of 2001. (Doğan et al., 2002, p. 297).

Personal computers are not widely diffused as only 3.81 per 100 inhabitants own one, but only 2.80% of those PCs are connected to the Internet. Internet connections are relatively expensive, so that may explain its low penetration—an average of \$11.20 for 20 hours access per month. Software is frequently pirated and the piracy rate stands at about 63% (Doğaç et al., p. 297).

Other sources indicate increased use of the Internet in Turkey. According to statistics cited in the *New Media Review*, (<http://www.etcnewmedia.com/review/default.asp?SectionID=11&CountryID=90>) about 5.4% of the Turkish population were identified as Internet users in 2000, with predictions that the figure would increase to about 11% by 2006. Another source cited in that report found that a much higher percentage of people from all age groups were online in 2000—24% of those under the age of 20; 22% of those aged 20 to 29; 18% of people aged 30 to 39; 18% of people aged 40 to 59; and even 15% of those aged 60 or above. Of course it is hard to know exactly how many people in any country use the Internet, but it is more difficult to determine in a country like Turkey where data gathering is more difficult and where many users access the Internet from neighborhood Internet cafes.

In the last two years the Turkish economy has experienced a severe crisis that has also impacted the mass media, causing many journalists to lose their jobs (about 3,000 by the Turkish Press Council's account)(Çelik, May 21, 2001). Many unemployed journalists and others who were critical of the bias in the print and broadcast news media, opened Internet news sites that became very popular alternative news sources. One of them, *Haberturk* reported 4 million hits a day from 140,000 unique visitors (Erginsoy, 2001, April 13). These online news sources also served as a more trusted source of information as the extreme amount of concentration of media ownership has led to a loss of credibility in the information that appears in the mass media. In a poll conducted at the end of February 2001, the press ranked only just above political parties for their lack of public trust (Erginsoy, 2001, April 13). So the opening of many Internet news services has encouraged more people to make regular use of the Internet in the last two years.

If alternative news sources have driven more people to use the Internet, itiraf.com has received more attention because of the opportunity it offers for people to tell their stories to the world online. The word has gotten out that itiraf.com exists on the web from news stories in the mass media, from several imitators on television and in the print press, and from the selected confessions that appeared in the book by the same name that was published in March 2002. That book became so popular that it is now in its third press run (Özer, 2002, July 1).

How to Understand the Popularity of a Confession medium

The Confession Magazine: Confession media began in the United States with Bernarr Macfadden, an American publisher who founded *Physical Culture* in 1899. The point of the magazine was the promotion of physical fitness through exercise and diet (Gerbner, 1958, p. 29; Marr, May 2001). In what was one of the first articles on the confession magazines spun off from *Physical Culture*, Gerbner quoted Mary Mcfadden on the reasons she encouraged Bernarr to launch the first confession magazine, *True Story* in 1919. "Broken-hearted women sent us letters. . . after they had done two hundred knee bends, twice a day, and had thrown

away their corsets, only to find that the Greek gods wouldn't give them a tumble. . . There were girls who confessed their sexual mistakes and thought they were fallen women until they had taken up dumbbells (the iron kind) and gone in for carrots which had given them bright eyes. . . (Gerbner, 1958, p. 29). Mary Mcfadden wrote that she told her husband that the stories should be written in the first person by the readers of the magazine. "This has never been done before. I believe it will have a wide readership" (1953, p. 219). Mary Macfadden said her husband was insistent that the stories come only from "common people," so Mary said that she had to throw out any contributions from people who had even the least bit of training in writing. "Frequently, if a narrative sounded too 'high-brow,' my husband asked the office elevator operator to read it. If it was over his head it went back to the author. A wag on the editorial staff had written a piece for barroom reading entitled: 'How I was Demoted to Editor of *True Story* and Worked my Way Up to Elevator Man Again'" (1953, pp. 223-224).

True Story became so popular (passing a circulation figure of a million in 1925) that it spawned three other Macfadden magazines—*True Confessions* in 1922, *True Romances*, *True Love* and *True Experience* (Marr, 2001). Gerbner wrote that by the mid-1900s, about 40 titles in the romance-confession area existed with a combined circulation of 16 million.

Readers of these magazines had little education, came largely from small towns in the South and the Midwest, and constituted an audience that was previously ignored by advertisers because of their low incomes and lack of regular reading habits.(Gerbner, 1958, 29). Though *True Story* was first published full of true stories, the confession magazines quickly turned into formula-written pieces by freelancers (Marr, 2001, April 25). Mcfadden is said to have insisted that the stories be "true," even when professional writers submitted them to the magazine. But confession magazines have mostly not contained accurate portrayals of real-life stories.

Gerbner cites market research conducted in the 1950s that identified the type of reader who purchased confession magazines.

...The confession reader does not feel as much the center and prime mover of the family as does the white collar reader. She is more emotional about her job as a mother, and is torn by a conflict between that job and her role as a wife to a greater degree than is the middle class woman (1958, p. 32).

Gerbner also cites an unpublished study by Wilbur Schramm, pioneer communication researcher, that content analyzed 100 confession stories. Among other things, Schramm found that the sex drive drove most of the characters to violate society's code of conduct. "Typically described as 'overwhelming' and 'overpowering,' the erotic scenes 'usually described with gusto, even though covered over with later shame' numbered 40 cases of adultery, 32 of premarital relations, and 4 of prostitution, plus the 8 cases of rape. . . (Gerbner, 1958, p. 37 and Schramm, 1955).

The height of popularity for confession magazines was in the 1930s, '40s and '50s. By the 1970s, about 36 titles appeared regularly but most of them had ceased publication by the 1980s (Marr, 2001). Today four titles appear monthly and still attract freelance work and readers. All of the confession magazines are published by Macfaddon and the target audience is still working class women. Several web sites provide instruction on writing for

this genre. In an interview, Bea Sheftel, print and web magazine writer, defined the confession story like this:

A confession is a short story told in the first person from the woman's point of view. It can be a romance, coming of age, or other story where the protagonist learns from her mistakes. Confessions are written in a fictional format from the first person point of view. They can be about something that happened to you or someone you know. Even though you use fiction story techniques, whatever can be true should be true (The editors of some of the magazines still want their readers to think the stories are real) (Maira Allen, online).

Though confession magazines do not stand at the top of best-selling periodicals today, they are still being read. The U.S. media environment offers many alternate opportunities to tell one's stories publicly—chiefly through talk radio and television—which may have contributed to the decline in popularity of this medium.

The confession magazine does not exist as a genre in Turkey. However, many magazines are published that tell the stories of Turkish celebrities—from actors and rock stars to sports figures and politicians. Though no one magazine has higher than 38,000 circulation, 637 different titles circulate in Turkey today, about equally split between weeklies and monthlies. Many of these titles are Turkish versions of U.S. or European magazines and are published as joint ventures with foreign publishers. (<http://www.magazineworld.org/members/WMT/PDFs/TurkeyWMT01.pdf>, Accessed October 27, 2002). Daily newspapers also publish magazine sections that include stories of pop culture icons. Though no longer published as a genre today, the *Fotoroman* magazine came the closest to the U.S. confession magazine. Like the confession magazine, these publications were targeted to young girls and housewives—and especially to those with limited literacy. They told stories of love and romance and put them in comic book format with limited text. In research conducted in the 1970s Ogan found that these magazines were very popular with women in urban squatter settlements (1976). Recently, many newspapers have a special section for confessions, like "Guzin Ablâ." This person is generally an old lady who looks very knowledgeable on everything. Whether she is a single individual who gives advice or a group of writers is not known.

Talk Shows and Reality Television: Another way to understand the confession web site is in the context of talk radio and television and the more currently popular reality television programs. From the radio or television producers' point of view, talk shows and reality programming costs less than scripted drama, situation comedy or documentaries. But from the listener or viewer's perspective, these programs are interesting because the audience is able to see people who hold views similar to their own. And they do not see those views represented in mainstream media (Scott, 1996, p. 10).

Lowney (1999) has a different view of why people watch these shows. She compares the experience to watching a circus act in which performers take risks and the audience is fascinated as much by the thrill of watching the risk taker as much as the entertainment that is provided.

Likewise, guests on talk shows take risks. They expose their lives in ways that some of us might fantasize about and others might find repellant. They can disclose—and cause wounds. We know that secrets are a moment away from being spilled. Anxiously we watch both the carnival and the talk show “acts,” always aware of the precariousness of the situation. Talk shows become glimpses into the pain (much less often the joy) that is life. Watching deviant persons suffer can make us rejoice at the life that we have while at the same time they can remind us of the need for a morality that binds people together. These shows do, then, feature a moral discourse (Lowney, 1999, p. 17).

In a critical analysis of *The Jerry Springer Show*, Brusckke (1998) takes a similar position. “Starting with the premise that the only difference between the Jerry Springer Show and a carnival freak show is that the guests are emotionally rather than physically deformed, what is it that makes them freakish? Physical freaks stand out because of their grave deviance from ‘normal’ physical characteristics, so it may stand to reason that social freaks are those that deviate from ‘normal’ social characteristics to such a large degree that they seem outlandish.”

Though people tell their personal stories on talk television programs, the producers of the programs—from Oprah to Springer—select the guests to tell those stories based on a set of criteria. And Lowney argues that the people are manipulated and their life stories made simplistic by the hosts of the shows (1999, p. 16). Meanwhile the audience is entertained and at the same time engaged in a revivalistic ritual where they watch sinners confess and even receive absolution from the people they have wronged in their lives (Lowney, 1999, p. 17).

The reality television program is another way of letting an audience observe the “real lives” of people, but like talk television, scripts those lives to take on a dramatic form. As playwright Tom Donaghy argues, these programs “‘reality’ had been meticulously arranged for television consumption” (October 29, 2000). “Survivor” participant, Jerri Manthey (2002, Sept. 2) was surprised that people didn’t understand that the program was intensely edited before broadcast. “I learned a lot about the power of the media, and the scary fact that people believe almost everything they see on television.” Born in European television, the reality-based program was brought to the United States as a way to get high ratings at very low cost. They also spread to the rest of the world’s television screens for the same reason. In the fall of 2002, “Big Brother” the program that features a group of people living in a house together for 100 days while the audience watches and decides which ones will be eliminated, had official websites in 13 different countries and is reported to have 18 versions around the globe. While a failure in the United States, the program was enormously popular in Europe.

Veronica, the Dutch channel that aired the first edition of BB, more than doubled its viewer share; Channel 4 in England had the best results in four years and the final episode reached a 45% share; RTL2 in Germany reached 40%; Telecinco in Spain 64%; Canale 5 in Italy an unprecedented 59%, Kanaal 2 in Belgium more than 53%; and so on in Switzerland, Portugal, and other European countries. New editions of the show were recently broadcast in Holland and Germany, while new editions are programmed in most European countries (Sigismondi, 2001, p. 31).

Turkey has had its experience with the “Big Brother” reality show renamed there as “Someone is Watching Us.” It drew big television and Internet audiences, but caused the station that broadcast the program to be closed for a week this year by the Radio and Television Supreme Board (RTUK) because of its immoral content and potential to destroy families (“Greek TV Watchdog,” 2002, March 23). This happened despite the decision to exclude cameras from the house’s lavatory and bathroom so that Muslim viewers would not be offended (McCann, 2001, May 3). RTUK’s chairman, Nuri Kayis said that the view into people’s private lives was not morally proper. “This program is not respectful of the private lives of the contestants even if they allow people to watch them, and it puts the audience into a situation like psychologically abnormal peepers” (“Making People Feel,” 2001, May 28).

The notion of telling stories about people’s private lives also exists in a number of programs that focus on the lives of Turkish celebrities. Generally these celebrities are sports heroes whose sexual exploits are described on the program, rather than stories about their athletic abilities. “Televole” is the most popular of these and has spawned the term “Televole culture” that refers to the lifestyle of those who have made lots of easy money and flaunt it in their fashion, expensive cars, involvement in sex scandals, and night life. Some Turks may aspire to that lifestyle while a large group of Muslims and intellectuals disdain it. The popularity of such programs may also lie in the voyeuristic experience it offers the viewers. This trend in broadcasting and also in magazine journalism in Turkey may be occurring in the online confession site where people can imitate the celebrities by telling their own stories. And since those who confess are only identified by their geographic location, gender and age, it is likely that at least some of the confessions convey stories the people only wish were true.

Programs like “Televole” and “Someone is Watching Us” were not always a part of the broadcasting scene. In the last twenty years much has changed in Turkey to privilege popular culture. Up until 1991 the Turkish Radio and Television Corporation (TRT), the public broadcasting monopoly, controlled all of the programming for the country through geographic, political and cultural centralization. As Öncü and others have pointed out, TRT did not allow the popular culture of the lower classes to be aired. “The syncretism of urban popular cultural forms was anathema within TRT’s world of cultural imagery, which coupled the mission of disseminating modernism to uneducated citizens with the preservation of the ‘folk’ (peasant) heritage of the nation. As far as TRT was concerned, the kitsch commercial world of urban immigrants and the lower middle class did not exist (2000, p. 303). Aksoy and Robins say that TRT was deliberately excluding the voices of the common people so they could remake the identity of the citizenry.

The explicit intention was to establish a cultural industry that would work to create a Turkish cultural identity in conformity with the elite’s modern and now “official” image. TRT’s output was directed to an ideal, and idealized people who were unified in their shared citizenship and national attachment. The broadcasting monopoly assumed a highly censorious attitude—which gave rise to practices of exclusion and open censorship—towards whatever it regarded as deviant in cultural tone or attitude. This stance has amounted to a purification of the cultural space: TRT has sought to rid the cultural environment of what it perceived as its peripheral, rural, sentimental, unruly, or disorderly elements.

The “real” Turkey, with all the complexities and diversity of its civil society and cultural identities, has been denied, or more correctly, disavowed, in the name of the “official” cultural ideal (Aksoy and Robins, p. 1942).

But when Turkish broadcasting became privatized after 1991 (and legally so in 1994), a multiplicity of voices and identities could be heard and seen across the land. So programs that could be considered “banal,” to use Öncü’s term, included arabesque music and Televole-type entertainment.

Religious Confessions: Christians confess their sins in both public and private fashion. And following the confessions, a member of the clergy gives absolution to the sinner. Traditionally, Catholic and orthodox churches have private confessions with a priest in a closed confessional with a barrier between the confessor and the priest so they cannot see each other. Private confessions have been on the decline in the Catholic church since the 1970s and the church has tried to revive the practice in the last few years (Greeley, 2001, April 29, p. 32). The church now offers the confession experience in well lit rooms with a face-to-face encounter with a priest.

The lack of interest in confessing sins led to the creation of the online confessional. There are several such sites on the web, but the London-based Christian Radio’s site, www.theconfessor.org, is typical. Following its launch in February 2001, the site received one million visits in the first 72 hours. On this site you are first shown a series of Bible passages about sin and confession, and then you are urged to either write down your sins or reflect on them as you gaze at the screen. You are assured that what you write will not be sent to anyone else.

Upon hearing of the online confession sites, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications took up the issue for discussion in the spring of 2001. They issued a document in June last year that online confessions must take place in “the sacramental context of a personal encounter,” according to Archbishop John Foley, the president of the Council. He is also reported to have said that the “Internet offers the church the opportunity to make the saving message of Christ accessible throughout the world. . . In societies that don’t allow the presence of priests, nuns, religious or lay missionaries, Internet can offer people undertaking a spiritual quest, or even just the curious, a chance to obtain information or find an inspiration that would otherwise be impossible” (Willan, June 6, 2001). The Council takes the position that confession must be based on a “personal vocal encounter between priest and penitent” (2001, June 5).

But this position taken by the Vatican has not brought online confession to a halt. In fact, they seem to be thriving. Theconfessor.org continues to get “tens of thousands of visitors each day,” according to Peter Kerridge, the managing director (Kucinski, 2001, June 9, p. D1). Another of these sites, www.dailyconfession.com, offers chat rooms about confessions as well as displaying daily confessions, and selects “featured” confessions along with offering the user the opportunity to confess. www.notproud.com includes a book of online confessions. On this site you can confess your sins in one of the seven-deadly-sins categories or under a miscellaneous category for sins that don’t fit anywhere else. You can also read other people’s confessions of the various types. A twist on the www.fess-up.com site is that other than confessing sins, or providing “secrets and revelations,” you can accuse others of

being sinful in anonymous email sent to them. *Girls Life Magazine*, an online magazine for 10-15-year-olds, includes a section where girls are encouraged to tell their stories anonymously. They are told that they will be included in the next month's confessions section. Confession sites like these seem to come and go on the Internet, however.

Reporters have written about online confession sites, but many of these have already disappeared from the Internet. That is why the three-year run of Itiraf.com is so interesting. And itiraf.com exists in a society that is almost totally Muslim. Though many Turks are not practicing Muslims, about half of the people responding to a question on the Itiraf.com site that called for a response to frequency of fasting during Ramadan said they regularly fast. It is likely that those who fast believe in other tenets of Islam.

Sunni Islam has no tradition of confession and absolution, and most Turks are affiliate with this branch of Islam. Though Muslims believe that followers can commit sin, they do not believe that Jesus Christ died for their sins and that it is therefore necessary to confess those sins and ask for forgiveness. The concept of original sin is not a part of Muslim belief. When Muslims congregate at the mosque, it is most often for Friday prayers only. Forgiveness is important in Islam, but is not a part of regular worship. Muslims are charged to forgive one another and Allah is forgiving. The Imam is generally not consulted in the same way a priest would be when a Catholic confesses his or her sins. So it is possible that people turn to itiraf.com in the same way Christians might when confessing sins to their priest or minister.

The Alevi sect of Islam does include confession as part of its worship in the meeting houses or Cem Evi. At the low end, a reported 10-12 million Turks follow this alternate version of Islam in which people do not generally practice ritual prayer or go to the mosque on Fridays. Instead, they have a congregational meeting led by a *dede* (grandfather) once a week. Only those people (men and women) who confess their personal sins to one another and who are reconciled with those to whom they have committed sin and served the penance meted out by the *dede* are allowed to take part in the service at the Cem Evi or to share the meal with others there (Shindeldecker, p. 11). It is unknown, however, how many practicing Alevites exist in Turkey because for many years the state forbid practice of their religious rites.

Foucault details the importance of confession for Christians. In his analysis of Western societies Foucault notes that confession was "one of the main rituals we rely on for the production of truth: the codification of the sacrament of penance by the Lateran council in 1215 (1990, p. 58). He believed that it has become "one of the most highly valued techniques for producing truth (p. 59). And since the Middle Ages confession has become pervasive in the lives of Westerners.

It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one's crimes, one's sins, one's thoughts and desires, one's illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling, with the greatest precision, whatever is difficult to tell. One confesses in public and in private, to one's parents, one's educators, one's doctor, to those one loves; one admits to oneself, in pleasure and in pain, things it would be impossible to tell anyone else, the things people write books about. One confesses—or is forced to confess (Foucault, p. 59).

Foucault later described the widening of the influence of confession from its entrenchment in the practice of penance in Catholicism to adoption by Protestants to “eighteenth-century pedagogy, and nineteenth-century medicine, it gradually lost its ritualistic and exclusive localization; it spread; it has been employed in a whole series of relationships: children and parents, students and educators, patients and psychiatrists, delinquents and experts (p. 63). Eventually, Foucault said, the rituals of confession began “to function within the norms of scientific regularity” (p. 65). Foucault is mainly concerned with sexual confession and the way in which it adapted to the rules of scientific discourse over the centuries, finally emerging a “*scientia sexualis*” in the nineteenth century.

Interestingly, Foucault could also be considered an orientalist in Edward Said’s framing of the term, as he viewed Arabo-Moslem societies (which would include the Ottomans) as ones that “endowed themselves with an *ars erotica*. . . where truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience; pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and the soul” (p. 57). So it was that these societies had no need to develop a tradition of confession to deal with sexual acts, Foucault implies.

Many of the confessions on the itiraf.com site—about half—deal with issues of sexuality in one way or another. So even if Foucault was right about the Moslem tradition of *ars erotica*, at least the 55,000 people who visit the site daily have interest in confessing or reading other people’s confessions about their sexual behavior. Why this happens may be an important question to answer.

Locating a Method for Studying Internet Sites

Ever since the web began researchers have been trying to determine how to examine this medium that contains elements of both mass communication and interpersonal communication. In discussing the role of computer mediation in the role of social support, Walther and Boyd (2002) have written that traditional communication channels may not be meeting the needs of the audience.

It offers some evidence to Egdorf and Rahoi’s (1994) suggestion that electronic social support helps to satisfy unmet needs in nonmediated relationships. Whether it is because one doesn’t have access to a critical mass of similar (expert) others, or one’s close relations might deteriorate in response to a request for help—or one needs respite from the double-edged sword of dependency and obligation accompanying support in close relationships—accessing social support via CMC and electronic networks offer a potent alternative (p. 182).

So it seems that we might be able to understand the interest in itiraf.com in the context of computer mediated communications and the theories that are related to it.

In the early days of the web, Morris and Ogan (1996) suggested that "As new communication technologies are developed, researchers seem to use the patterns of research established for existing technologies to explain the uses and effects of the new media" (p. 44). They further noted that applying theories of mass communication to the web might serve as a starting point for understanding it. One that they thought applied particularly well was that of uses and gratifications theory (Morris and Ogan, 1996, p.46). The logic of the uses-and-gratifications approach, based in functional analysis (though Palmgreen (1984) rejects that view), is derived from "(1) the social and psychological origins of (2) needs, which generate (3) expectations of (4) the mass media and other sources, which lead to (5) differential patterns of media exposure (or engagement in other activities), resulting in (7) other consequences, perhaps mostly unintended ones" (Blumler and Katz, 1974). Uses and gratifications theory seems particularly appropriate to studying the way people use the Internet as it presupposes that the audience is totally active, which has been presented as a problem when it came to applying the theory to use of mass media, Levy and Windahl (1984), who wrote that a totally active audience has been assumed in most studies of uses of mass media, have conceptualized audience activity as a variable in the mass media environment, but Internet users, particularly those who frequent highly interactive sites would need to be highly active.

Since 1996 several researchers have applied uses and gratifications theory to aspects of Internet research. In a meta analysis of published research referenced in *Communication Abstracts* from 1996-2000, Kim and Weaver (2002) found that 82.9% of articles focused on the Internet or the World Wide Web were atheoretical. Of the ones that applied any theory at all, 21.9% used a uses and gratifications framework for the articles (p. 531).

Uses and gratifications research of the web has been almost totally focused on individuals' use of the whole Internet, and therefore the range of sites open to use (Kaye and Johnson, 2002; Charney and Greenberg, 2002; Angleman, 2000; Luo, 2002; Ebersole, 2000; Ferguson and Perse, 2000; Papacharissi and Rubin, 2000). Little research has focused on individual web sites. Mings (1997) conducted a pilot study of uses and gratifications related to reading online newspapers. She found that the gratifications sought in reading online newspapers are factors in users going to view those news sites. And some of the gratifications sought and obtained in reading newspapers in print format led them to expect the same experience online (1997, p. 18). Gandy and McChristian (2002) studied the uses made of the "Big Brother" web site in conjunction with viewing the "Big Brother" television program. They found that those who both watched the show and used the web site were more actively involved as an audience than those who only watched the television program. Though Kaye and Johnson's study (2002) allowed respondents to give answers to uses and gratifications-based questions from their use of the entire web, the questions focused on the use of the web for a particular purpose—to find political information.

In general, it appears that uses and gratifications is an excellent way to research the motivations for using the Internet and the gratifications received from that activity. But measurement of this theory may be more problematic. In typical uses and gratifications research, respondents are asked a battery of fixed response questions in which they are asked about their use of a particular medium or genre of a medium classified under the categories of social, entertainment, acquisition, surveillance, pass time, identity, etc. (Charney and Greenberg, 2002). The respondents may never have thought that they used a

particular medium for the use being queried but now have to say whether they use it for this purpose on a five-point scale. For example, under the entertainment gratification, respondents were asked whether they used the Internet to have fun, feel good, be entertained, find excitement or play (Charney and Greenberg, 2002, p. 386). In addition, the respondents in that study were asked about their use of the entire Internet. The millions of sites on the Internet vary much more widely than channels on television or radio or a range of newspapers do. Traditional mass media have Internet sites that may be exact or near exact duplicates of their broadcast or print formats. Other sites are far more interactive and require the user to both select content and input information. Search engines require people to know what information they are seeking. And of course chat rooms and Usenet groups are closer to face-to-face interpersonal communication forms, requiring complete interactivity if the user is a real participant and very little interactivity if the user is a mere lurker. So for the researcher to ask about the range of gratifications sought and obtained on "The Internet" assumes that the content is relatively uniform—while the respondent may be thinking of an entirely different use of the medium than does the researcher. This problem with applying uses and gratifications research categories to the whole Internet would suggest that 1) research be more focused on particular categories of sites or unique formats and 2) that use of open-ended questions that ask respondents to surveys why they use particular sites and what they get out of that experience may provide a more accurate picture of the gratifications sought and obtained from the use. Users and gratifications researchers have almost always relied on survey research methods, though a few studies have been based on experiments. Open-ended questions could be posed in a survey in a web-based questionnaire. Then content analysis or some other textual analysis technique could be used to explore a possibly wider range of gratifications in such a study.

In his 1984 theoretical essay on uses and gratifications research, Palmgreen proposes an integrative gratifications model of mass media consumption that could be applied to a range of Internet content. Though writing before the development of the web, he says that one of the features of the model is that it "reveals several potential sources of change in both audience consumption behavior and media structure and content" (1984, p. 48). He notes that "change may also result from variations in the social and cultural milieu in which media use is embedded" (1984, p. 48). He mentions the "rapid evolution of media technology" as one of those changes and cautions that study of new media may require the addition of new gratifications for study (pp. 48, 49). That has happened to some degree. Typically focus groups (and sometimes written essays) by users of a medium have been used as a way to develop the measures posed to respondents in Likert-type scales (Wimmer and Dominick, 1997, p. 353). But as studies focus in on a single genre of Internet site, they may add gratifications that are more specific and appropriate to that genre.

It would appear that when studying uses of itiraf.com that a range of psychological variables should be included. The findings of Papacharissi and Rubin's study (2000) would support that conclusion. They found that

Internet users who avoided face-to-face interaction, or found it to be less rewarding, chose the Internet as a functional alternative channel to fulfill interpersonal needs. This finding would resonate well with suggestions that computer-mediated communication is used for "identity fixes" and to establish or alter one's identity, and to reinvent one's virtual personality.

The itiraf.com site combines features of a mass communication medium with that of interpersonal communication. A user of the site could be just a lurker but could also interact with confession writers by responding to a particular confession. It is also possible for a two or more people to talk to exchange e-mail addresses and communicate off the site or form a larger group and communicate in a chat room or in a face-to-face meeting.

Researching uses of Itiraf.com

This paper provides only the conceptual framework for studying the Turkish confession site. It draws its conceptual perspective from the uses made of other confession media, and from the religious, social and media environment out of which the site has arisen, It is more than interesting that a communication medium where people tell their stories has been so popular for so long and with such a loyal following. Without conducting empirical work to determine what gratifications are sought and obtained, we will not know what the contributors of confessions and the readers of confessions find so fascinating about this place on the web. It is hoped that the next part of this study will be able to advance the theory in the area of use of Internet sites. Wimmer and Dominick (1997) have called for increase theory building in the area of uses and gratifications. They say that researchers "are not only interested in content characteristics but want to develop theories that explain and predict the media consumption of the public based on sociological, psychological, and structural variables (p. 355). The empirical study that follows this conceptual exploration should take a step further in that direction.

Bibliography

- Aksoy, A. and Kevin Robins. (1997). "Peripheral Vision: Cultural Industries and Cultural Identities in Turkey," *Environment and Planning*, 29(11), 1937-1952.
- Angleman, S. (2001). "Uses and Gratifications and Internet Profiles: A Factor Analysis. Is Internet Use and Travel to Cyberspace Reinforced by Unrealized Gratifications?" Paper presented at the Western Science Social Association Conference, Reno, NV. <<http://www.jrily.com/LiteraryIllusions/InternetGratificationStudyIndex.html>> Accessed October 30, 2002.
- Blumler, J., & Katz, E. (Eds.). (1974). *The uses of mass communications*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Bruschke, J. (1998). "A Critical Analysis of the Jerry Springer Show." Online. http://commfaculty.fullerton.edu/jbruschke/images/a_critical_analysis_of_the_jerry.htm Accessed October 20, 2002.
- Çelik, I. (2001, May 21). "Seminar Shows Growing 'Online' Gap Between Turkey and Europe," *Turkish Daily News* online. May 21, 2001, accessed May 21, 2001 (<http://www.turkishdailynews.com>).
- Doğan, A., A. Acar and M. Putnam, ".tr." In G.S. Kirkman et al., Editors. *The Global Information Technology Report: Readiness for the Networked World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, 296-97.
- Donaghy, T. (2000, October 29). "How Reality Can Be 'Realer' on the Stage Than Raw." *The New York Times*. Section 2, p. 5.

- Ebersole, S. (2000, September). "Uses and Gratifications of the Web among Students." *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*. 6(1)
<http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol6/issue1/ebersole.html>
- Egdorf, K. and R.L. Rahoi (1994, November). "Finding a place where "We all want to hear it": E-mail as a source of social support." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, New Orleans.
- Erginsoy, A. (2001, April 13). "News Websites in Turkey Challenge Traditional Media." *Eurasianet.org*. Accessed October 12, 2002.
- Fisher, I. (2002, October 31). "Party with Islamic Roots Likely to Win Turkish Votes." *The New York Times*, p. 3.
- Foucault, M. (1990). *The History of Sexuality*. Translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage books, 1990.
- Greeley, Andrew. (2001, April 29). "Confessional's Demise Dates Back to '60s." *Chicago Sun-Times*. P. 32.
- Gandy, L. and L. McChristian. (2002). "Reality Television Goes Interactive: The Big Brother Television Audience.: Unpublished paper. Elon College, Elon, North Carolina.
- Gerbner, G. (1958, Summer). "The Social Anatomy of the romance-Confession Cover Girl." *Journalism Quarterly* 35(3). 299-306.
- Gerbner, G. (1958, Summer). "The Social Role of the Confession Magazine." *Social Problems*, 6, 29-40.
- "Greek TV Watchdog Chief Also Pulls Plug on Reality Shows." (2002, March 23). *Turkish Daily News*. http://www.turkishdailynews.com/old_editions/03_23_02/for.htm#f8
 Accessed August 9, 2002.
- Kaye, B.K. and T.J. Johnson. (2002, March). "Online and in the Know: Uses and Gratifications of the Web for Political Information." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*. 46(1), 54-71.
- Kim, S.T. and D. Weaver (2002, December). "Communication Research About the Internet: A Thematic Meta Analysis." *New Media & Society*. 4(4), 519-539.
- Kucinski, C. (2001, June 9). "Unburdening Your Sins Online; British Radio Station Offers Alternative to Face-to-face church Confessions." *The Hartford Courant*, p. D1.
- Levy, M.R. and S. Windahl (1984, January). "Audience Activity and gratifications: A conceptual clarification and Exploration." *Communication Research*. 11(1), 51-78.
- Lowney, K.S. *Baring Our Souls*. N.Y.: Aldine De Gruyter, 1999.
- Macfadden & E. Gauvreau. (1953). *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Manthey, J. (2002, Sept. 2). "Notes from a Survivor," *Electronic media*, p. 9.
- Marr, J. (2001, April 25). "Eighty Years of Agony: A History of Confession Magazines." <http://www.sfbg.com/lit/may01/agony.html> Accessed October 12, 2002.
- Luo, X. (2002). "Uses and Gratifications Theory and E-Consumer Behavior: A Structural Equation Modeling Study." *Journal of Interactive Advertising*. 2(2).
<http://jiad.org/vol2/no2/luo> Accessed October 15, 2002.
- McCann, P. (2001, May 3). "Everybody's Watching Big Brother." *The Times*.
- Macfadden, M. and E. Gauvreau. (1953). *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- "Making People Feel Like Big Brothers." (2001, May 28). *Turkish Daily News*.
http://www.turkishdailynews.com/old_editions/05_28_01/feature.htm Accessed May 23, 2000.

- "Markets By Country: Turkey." *New Media Review*.
<http://www.etcnewmedia.com/review/default.asp?SectionID=11&CountryID=90>
 Accessed October 5, 2002.
- Mings, S.M.(1997) "Uses and Gratifications of Online Newspapers." *The Electronic Journal of Communication*. 7(3). http://www.cios.org/getfile\Mings_V7N397 Accessed October 15, 2002.
- Morris, M. and C. Ogan (1996). *Journal of Communication* 46(1), Winter, 39-50.
 "No Confession by Internet, Prelate Warns." (2001, June 5). *Catholic World News*.
<http://www.cwnews.com/Browse/2001/06/15669.htm>. Accessed October 24, 2002.
- Ogan, C. (1976). *A return to Aktepe: A Study of Communication and Development in a Turkish Squatter Settlement*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina.
- Öncü, A. (2000). "The banal and the subversive." *European Journal of Cultural Studies*. 3(3), 296-318.
- Özer, E. (2002, July 1). Personal Interview. Istanbul, Turkey.
- Palmgreen, P. (1984). "Uses and Gratifications: A Theoretical Perspective." In R.N. Bostrom, Ed. *Communication Yearbook 8*. Beverly Hills: Sage, pp. 20-55.
- Shindeldecker, J. (n.d.) "Turkish Alevis Today." Online.
<http://www.alevibektasi.com/xalevis1.htm>. Accessed October 27, 2002.
- Schramm, W. (1955). "The World of the Confession Magazine." University of Illinois. Institute of Communications Research, dittoed report.
- Sigismondi, Alberto. (2001, Spring). "The Format of Success: Why Big Brother Succeeded in Europe but Failed in the U.S." *Television Quarterly*. 32(1), 30-34.
- Willan, P. (2001, June 6). "Vatican to Rule Out Online Confessions." *The Industry Standard.com*. LexisNexis. Accessed October 1, 2002.
- Wimmer, R.D. and J.R. Dominick (1977). *Mass Media Research: An Introduction*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth.

[Previous Paper](#) [Next Paper](#) [Contents](#)