

Making Sense of Spiritual Media: An Audience Study of “The Secret” DVD, book and website.

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Abstract

This paper considers *The Secret* DVD, together with the accompanying book and website, by means of analyzing an active audience seeking spiritual meaning and results. This study hypothesizes that many of those who have adopted *The Secret*'s spiritual framework have done so by adhering to beliefs and practices just as one would when they commit to an organized religion. Evidence of individuals adopting the set of beliefs as outlined in *The Secret* is analyzed by means of audience members' narratives published on the DVD and the book's complimentary website (www.theseecret.tv). This investigation considers the audience – or believers – of *The Secret* by means of a uses-and-gratifications theoretical framework. A “grounded” theoretical approach (Charmaz, 2006) is employed to analyze the audience and its narratives. Finally, particular attention is paid to how the audience/believers “use” *The Secret*, as well as references to traditional spiritual practices such as prayer, belief, and references to God.

Introduction

Released in 2006, *The Secret* (Byrne, 2006a) was first made available as a web-based, pay-per-view film. A feature-length presentation with no paid advertising or release in theatres, the film made a call to its viewers to “ask [for what they want], believe [that it will come] and receive [their desires]” (Byrne, 2006a). Audience appeal was positive, for following the viral success of the film, creator and producer Rhonda Byrne released the film in DVD format and wrote an accompanying book (Byrne, 2006b), which, at the end of February 2007, reached #1 on the *New York Times* best-seller list in the hardcover advice category. Success for this suite of spiritual media continued, as an audiobook was also released (Byrne, 2006c), as well as development of an accompanying website (www.theseecret.tv) and additional materials (Byrne, 2007a, 2007b, 2008) to help viewers and readers to reach their desires and “live a life of joy” (www.theseecret.tv/behind-the-secret.html). It is the purpose of this paper to consider the audience of this markedly successful media, and to explore how audience members test, adopt, and commit to the principles in this media suite.

What is the secret?

The remarkable success of *The Secret*¹ is indicative of an audience which is interested in a spiritual message intended to help them to achieve their goals. The media is part self-help, for it focuses on self-improvement, intention setting and the ability to release limits such that one can “have, do or be anything

¹ To avoid confusion, *The Secret* (in italics and capitalized) refers to the book and DVD of the same title. The secret (neither italics nor capitalized) refers to the teachings and principles outlined in the book, DVD and accompanying materials.

you want” (p. 1). *The Secret* is also spiritual in nature, for without preaching in a traditional “religious” sense, the DVD, book, audiobook and website all use the word “God” (Byrne, 2006, p. 164) and/or “Universe” (for example, Byrne, 2006b, p. 63) to refer to a Divine Being with which one can work in harmony.

Despite its marked success and appeal, the principles as outlined in *The Secret* are hardly new messages. All products branded with *The Secret* focus upon the Law of Attraction, which stated simply, focuses on positive thinking. Byrne recounts in the film that when her life was at a low point, her daughter presented her with a copy of Wattles’s *The Science of Getting Rich* (1910). This was the impetus for Byrne’s discovery of “the secret,” for she continued by reading similar works including Hill (2003/1937), Haanel (2008/1916) and Collier (2007/1925). In her quest to learn more about how to achieve success, Byrne recognized a common theme, which she identified as “the secret”: one must be clear about one’s desires and firmly believe that they will come to fruition. Although the overwhelming success of *The Secret* may imply that Byrne’s message is an innovative one, there have been plenty of publications identifying the Law of Attraction - either by name or indirectly - as early as Mulford (2010/1889) and some published just before Byrne’s highly successful interpretation (Dooley, 2001; Walsch, 1996). In wishing to popularize the message, however, Byrne packaged her publication in a way that appealed to the masses like none of those knowing “the secret” before her had done. The multimedia approach to communicating a spiritual, self-help message that an audience was ready to receive was a markedly successful one.

A new wave in self-help literature

Self-help literature is a noteworthy part of popular culture, for advice in personal development has been present since the beginnings of American culture and continues to be evident in society and culture today (Effing, 2009). Common categories in modern self-help literature include advice on financial wellbeing (Covey, 2004), psychological wellness and happiness (Dalai Lama, 1998; Schuller, 1987; Frankl, 2006, Burns, 1980), health (Myss, 1997; Northrup, 2010), relationships (McGraw, 2005) and overall positive thinking (Gillett, 1992; Murphy, 1963; Peale, 2003/1952). Effing (2009) suggests that while the overall tone of self-help literature has changed since the eighteenth century, modern self-help literature is characterized by a spiritual approach to wellbeing. *The Secret* and its popular success lends support to Effing’s claim. Recent self-help publications have taken a spiritual approach to financial wellbeing (Canfield, 2005; Vitale, 2005; Proctor, 1997; Doyle, 2003; Eker, 2005), a spiritual take on psychological wellness and health (Hay, 1999), the spiritual approach to relationships (Hicks, 2009; Gray, 2004) and publications on the Law of Attraction itself are also gaining attention (Losier, 2003). *The Secret* is

inclusive of each of these categories, for the audience can apply *The Secret's* teachings and principles to gain an improvement to many areas including (but not limited to) finance, health, relationships and spiritual development. It could be argued that for those who do not affiliate with an organized religion, turning to the prolific self-help literature focusing on spiritual development could be a way of fulfilling spiritual needs.

Theoretical framework

The conceptual framework for this paper employs uses and gratifications (U&G) theory. U&G theory posits that media audiences are active by means of consciously choosing the medium that fulfills their needs, and that audience members can recognize their reasons for making specific media choices (Katz, Blumler & Gurevitch, 1974). According to this theory, gratifications that individuals experience from media use can be both psychological and social (Blumler & Katz, 1974). This theoretical approach is markedly different from cultivation theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976; Gerbner, Gross, Morgan & Signorelli, 1994), which assumes a more homogeneous audience in which individuals are receptive to messages in the viewing process. Thus the U&G approach shifts the research focus from what the media does to people to what people do with the media (Rubin, 1993). Based on U&G theory, individuals actively seek out certain forms of media in a goal-directed and rational way, with the objective that the media will provide them with the gratifications that they seek.

Uses & gratifications theory has been used as a framework for examining traditional media such as newspapers (Elliott & Rosenberg, 1987), television (Conway & Rubin, 1991; Babrow, 1987), and radio (Mendelsohn, 1964) with prolific literature on the issue of violent programming (for example, Slater, 2003; Conway & Rubin, 1991; Greene & Krmar, 2005; Krmar & Greene, 1999). McQuail's contributions to U&G theory (1984, 1987) suggest that four major categories categorize individual media use: information (such as finding out about relevant events, satisfying curiosity); personal identity (including finding reinforcement for personal values and finding models of behaviour); integration and social interaction (such as identifying with others, gaining a sense of belonging and connection); and entertainment (for example escaping from problems, filling time). U&G theory continues to have appeal given its applicability to new research areas in communication such as internet use (Ko, Cho & Roberts, 2005; Larose & Eastin, 2004; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000) email (Dimmick, Kline & Stafford, 2000), blog use (Chung & Kim, 2007; Li, 2007) and user-generated media (Guosong, 2009). This theory is particularly suitable to the present study because it provides a framework to consider an active audience which reads, watches, and/or purchases a specific type of spiritual self-help media. This paper, therefore, assumes that the audience of *The Secret* actively consumes whichever version of the product they choose.

The audience of *The Secret*, then, has specific needs for this media, and uses it in ways which can help to fulfil their personal goals and desires.

Hypothesis

At May, 2011, *The Secret* has been in the top 100 bestsellers in Religion & Spirituality on amazon.com for over 1630 days, or about 4.5 years. Byrne and other contributors to her work have been featured on mainstream television, including The Oprah Show (Winfrey, 2007), Larry King (King, 2006), Ellen DeGeneres (DeGeneres, 2006) and Montel Williams (Williams, 2007). The marked success of this spiritual media, together with the theoretical framework (uses & gratifications theory) for this research contribute to the formulation of the following hypothesis:

H1: The audience is drawn to *The Secret* because the principles – like a religion – help to provide a framework of beliefs, practices, and motivation for living one’s life.

Religion “defined”

It is not the purpose of this paper to provide a conclusive definition of “religion,” though a working definition is required in order to provide a framework for understanding the audience of spiritual media. Theoretical scholars in psychology (Freud, 1961/1928; Otto, 2010/1923), sociology (Durkheim, 2001/1912; Yinger, 1970), theology (Tillich, 1987), and anthropology (Geertz, 1966; Spiro, 1966; Tylor, 1958/1871) have provided a variety of definitions. Each field of study, in creating its own definition of religion, is by nature influenced by the discipline in which the definer studies. Thus each academic area emphasizes the importance of specific aspects of its own definition (Jones, 2006). Those engaging in empirical research seeking to define religion are continually taken with the diversity of replies when individuals are asked to define “religion” (Clark, 1958; Pargament, et al, 1995). In synthesizing the body of literature seeking to define religion, one may only conclude that “religion” has different meanings to different people, whether scholars or everyday citizens.

The myriad potential definitions of religion is perhaps summed up by James (1902): "...the very fact that [religions] are so many and so different from one another is enough to prove that the word 'religion' cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name" (p. 27). Or, as Rumi eloquently writes, “The lamps are different/ But the light is the same.” We must therefore, as scholars, give ourselves the flexibility to work with, redefine and continuously evaluate suggested definitions of this elusive term, particularly as the definitions relate to our own areas of study.

Of particular interest to the issue addressed in this paper is the concept of religion as a tool in everyday life. In formulating his definition of religion for the purposes of considering religion and coping, Pargament (1997) stresses the delineation between the substantive definition of religion from the functional. Substantive definitions of religion focus upon beliefs, practices and feelings in relation to a greater Being (Pargament, 1997, p. 25). Thus the substantive definition of religion focuses upon what a religion *is*. Rather, the functional definition of religion focuses upon what a religion *does* – this definition addresses the beliefs, practices, and feelings as they help us to deal with issues of how and why we live. Clearly the best definitions of “religion,” regardless of discipline, will span the gap between substantive and functional, addressing not only what religion is, but also what religion does.

Common – though not exhaustive – elements in the definition of religion include the notion of a deity (James, 1902; Kant, 1784/1793; Schleiermacher, 1785/1830-1831; Tillich, 1987), beliefs that individuals hold (Durkheim, 2001; Livingston, 1989; Tylor, 1871/1958; Yinger, 1970) and the quest for people to find meaning or significance in life (Tillich, 1987; Swidler & Mojzes, 2000). Clearly there are caveats in including any defining element; for example, including the notion of a deity in the definition of religion then eliminates Atheism, Agnosticism or Humanism from the set of suitable worldviews, and no one definition will please all scholars or religious adherents. Stewart Hoover (2006) agrees that there is no one unequivocal definition of “religion,” though Hoover adopts Geertz’s framework as the working definition of religion in his extensive study on media and religion.²

According to Hoover (2006, p. 23), Geertz’s definition allows for researchers to consider how people describe not only themselves, but also their practices. The definition provides the opportunity to consider the interplay between religion and media, and also the opportunity to consider how religion and religious experiences have evolved in a contemporary sense. While Geertz has been criticized for framing a definition that allows for nearly anything to be “religious” so long as the believer professes it as such, this definition is of particular importance to this study, for the study considers the *practices* of religion, rather than the sheer act of one *declaring* their practices as religious. It is within the context of Geertz and Hoover’s definition, together with the uses and gratifications framework, that we may examine why and how the audience engages with the principles in *The Secret*.

Method

² Geertz’s description of religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish a powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz, in Hoover, 2006, p. 23).

The Secret website offers visitors the opportunity to post their personal stories relative to their interactions with, thoughts about, and success with the principles outlined in *The Secret* (<http://www.theseecret.tv/living-the-secret.html>). Individuals may post their narratives in one of 17 thematic categories, including family, friends, pets, health, wealth, and faith. The 7 categories with the most narratives posted on the site are Life (12.7%), Finances (12.6%), Inspiration (8.6%), Job (7.5%), Inner (7.1%), Goals (7%) and Faith (6.9%). As this research was being conducted, the Faith category hosted 518 narratives. Data for this research included 50 stories in the Faith category (stories posted from December 2009 – February 2010). The Faith category was the chosen theme of examination as it was deemed the most likely area to provide insight into the religiousness of narrative authors. Narratives taken from a 3-month period were chosen as a means of analyzing a period which would be reflective of the cultural, religious, and spiritual makeup of the audience during a particular timeframe.

Narratives from the website were transcribed, and in keeping with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), initial coding was performed by the author and a trained student. The initial coding was conducted on a line-by-line basis (Charmaz, p. 50-51). Following discussion between the author and the other coder, focused codes (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57-60) were developed and a coding guide was developed which consisted of 14 categories. This focused coding process involved identifying the most significant and frequent initial codes, and determining the adequacy of such codes in order to code the data as completely and concisely as possible. Once focused coding was completed by both coders, Phi coefficient (Scott, 1955) was calculated in order to determine inter-rater reliability, and yielded an acceptable result at .85. The results section includes selections from the original online stories to demonstrate the content of the focused categories.

Results

H1 was addressed by performing frequency counts of details in the narratives. The prediction that individuals use *The Secret* as they would a religion, was supported. Counts of categories and subcategories were performed to address the notion of belief, references to God/Divine/Universe/Source, how the narrative writers on *The Secret*'s website used the media and principles therein, and how the principles brought meaning to individuals' lives. The U&G theory expects that individuals have specific reasons for interacting with media. Those posting stories or narratives in the online forum expressed identifiable reasons for interacting with the book, DVD, and practices described in *The Secret*. Table 1 outlines the most common categories identified in the analysis, together with the proportion of narratives coded for each category.

Table 1
Common themes in online narratives

Theme	% of narratives coded for theme
Success stories	98
Commitment	66
Doubt	54
Belief	48
God	46
Recommitment	32
“Using” <i>The Secret</i>	26

Those posting stories in the Faith category described their strong belief in the principles outlined in *The Secret*. Data in the focused category labelled “Belief” included reports in 48% (n=24) narratives. Individuals reported that they “believed and believed,” “believed that there is truth to the ideas,” and “no doubts, no questions, no fears. Just Faith.” Although the notion of faith and belief was frequent, individuals also reported that such belief or faith was reached only after a period of doubt. Twenty-seven stories (54%) included references to having initial doubts about the principles in *The Secret* (“I was skeptical about this sort of thing”), not being ready to work with the principles in the book or DVD at a particular point (“I never... gave any thought to reading *The Secret*”), and testing out the principles in *The Secret* to see if they worked on a personal level (“After reading a few pages of *The Secret*... I decided to try it out,” “I decided to see if this law of attraction really worked,” and “I told the universe that I was going to ask for one last “proof” that this [the principles in the book/Law of Attraction] was real...”). One hundred percent of narratives describing doubt, scepticism or testing of the principles outlined in *The Secret* concluded with a confirmation of belief or positive “proof” that the principles “work” (“It works. NO EXCEPTIONS,” “I have seen *The Secret* in action in a number of ways now, and there is no doubt in my mind that this is real”).

Individuals posting stories in the Faith category described the development of their devotion to the principles in *The Secret*; 66% (n=33) of the stories represented the theme of “commitment.” Twelve stories made specific mention of adhering to the principles as outlined in *The Secret* (“today I guide my life and follow these teachings without questioning,” “I am so convinced that there is no way that I cannot accept these teachings and adopt them as my philosophy to live,” and, “now that my life’s motto revolves around, ‘Thoughts become things,’ the evidence has become drastically apparent”). The theme of commitment also includes the subcategory of recommitment. Sixteen stories (32%) recounted how the website visitor “fell off the wagon” and then re-consulted the media in order to inspire faith again (“Yes I have had moments where I fell off the wagon because I forgot to remind myself of the beauty of life and the Power of the universe!!” “I listened to *The Secret* audio book to refresh my skills on getting in the right mind-frame to attract it back to me,” and, “once I got to reading the wonderful stories on your Secret Website, it started to come back to me”).

References to God/Divine Being(s) were referenced in 23 stories, or 46% of all narratives in the Faith category. The term “Universe” is used in the book and DVD, and was referenced interchangeably with the term “God” in the narratives (“Thank you Universe, G-d, or whatever Higher Spirit there is,” “I know the power of God, myself and the universe!” and “[I]quietly verbalised to the universe, “My child will be a healthy, happy, and loving child, perfectly made by God”).

The term, “use” or “using” *The Secret* was notable in the data, as 13 narratives (26%) specifically used the term “use” or “using” or “apply/application” (“Using the Secret, I prevailed,” “Now I am using the Secret on a day-to-day basis,” “I applied the Secret...”). Twenty narratives (40%) described “using” the tools including visualization (“So I visualized”), making “vision boards” (“I did my vision board”), and using affirmations (“I listened and repeated in my mind my positive affirmations”).

Of the 50 stories posted in the faith category online, 98% (n=49) described personal experiences illustrating the law of attraction at work in one’s life (the remaining narrative was a plea to visitors to the site to think positively in the midst of the current economic downturn). Such success stories constituted the focused category “success stories.” Included in such success stories are narratives of *The Secret* viewers attaining a new job (“I got an excellent job in the safest, most loving government organization on the planet”), a new car (“situations kept attracting me to the luxurious car I wanted, and I finally bought it”), relationships (“*The Secret* has touched my life in so many ways. My relationships are better with my two sons, my relationship is better with my boyfriend”), better health (“I was thrilled... I kept losing weight and started to eat more healthily once again”), or more mundane items such as a quarter or guitar pick (“I found my quarter. :) Actually, my quarter found me”).

Discussion

Fifty narratives posted online which described individuals' experiences with the highly successful media suite *The Secret* were analyzed. Nearly all narratives (98%) described evidence of the Law of Attraction, the main principle in *The Secret*, at work. Hypothesis 1, predicting that individuals use the principles outlined in *The Secret* as they would a religion, was supported. The data was examined relative to the working definition of "religion," and provides evidence that *The Secret* functions as a set of beliefs considered in relation to the Divine that people use to gain meaning and significance in their lives.

Over half (66%) of all narratives posted in the Faith category addressed commitment to the principles in *The Secret*, and 48% of all narratives specifically addressed an affirmative belief in the ideas and philosophy as outlined in the DVD and/or book. The frequency of references to belief and commitment is notable, for it gives relevance to the notion that individuals consider *The Secret* to represent a set of beliefs that are worthy of commitment. While it may appear surprising that such a great proportion of the audience represented in this data expressed firm "belief" in the principles in *The Secret*, it is notable that two narratives directly expressed that *The Secret* was compatible with their own religions ("I've discovered that *The Secret* ain't no secret! It is simply what the Bible teaches put into easier terms to understand. I think The Law of attraction works because it's God's Law!!!" and, "I love my church, and it brings me happiness and peace. *The Secret* works with it completely."). There is controversy surrounding the compatibility of *The Secret* with some Christian religions (Ankerberg Theological Research Institute, 2007; Velarde, 2007). A future opportunity for research exists in exploring specifically how Christians are able or not able to integrate the Law of Attraction into their faith.

The idea that the Law of Attraction, as depicted in *The Secret*, could be integrated into one's current religious framework is suggested by the data. References to God/Universe/Divine are made in *The Secret* DVD and book, and such references are reflected in the online audience narratives; 46% of all narratives mentioned "God" or "Universe." It is therefore possible that individuals adhering to *The Secret* are augmenting their current religious beliefs with the Law of Attraction, or perhaps such individuals are currently without an identifiable faith, and that their discovery of *The Secret* provides them with a religious agenda. It would be of particular interest to examine whether individuals enthusiastic about *The Secret* and its principles are currently practising a religion, or if they are without such a framework. This exploration could lend further understanding of the notion that *The Secret* functions as a religious framework if further research indicates that individuals "following" or "adhering to" *The Secret* do so without any other stated religious background.

Of particular note is the concept of “using” *The Secret*. Over a quarter of all narratives analyzed included the notion of “using” or “use” of the principles in *The Secret*, and all had positive results (“I’ve only been using it for a little while, but it has made me a lot of [sic] a better person!!!!”). For 40% of online authors in the Faith category, tools relative to “using” the secret were mentioned, including visualization and affirmations. In this case, 100% of all narratives indicated success or materialization of their desires (“It was all as I wanted and planned,” and, “I verbalised these sentiments daily... and God has blessed me with just that [my desire].”) or hope for attainment of one’s goals in future (“I’m going for the gold. Tonight I’m writing them up and will wait on the results.” “[I] am waiting for everything to be materialised by THE SECRET!”). While it does appear impressive that all of the stories in the sample of narratives analyzed concluded with success or attainment of a goal, it should be noted that those posting online are likely limited to those with successful experiences; it is unlikely that someone who did not meet with success or someone who disagreed with the principles in *The Secret* would be compelled to write and post a story. Nevertheless, it is the select group of those who choose associate with these principles who are of greatest interest to the present analysis.

Explicit use of the media is of particular interest in the context of U&G theory. Audience members considered in this research clearly articulated their incorporation of the media into their lives. The media was “used” the media to help them to attain material goods, achieve relationship success, or achieve a particular goal such as grades or a job. The media is, overall, used by the audience to create a religious framework as laid out by Geertz and Hoover. The media is used as a system which is powerful, pervasive, and also feels real and factual to the audience. This gratifies the audience by meeting one’s need for a spiritual or religious framework. The explicit notion that the audience “uses” *The Secret* lends clear support to the U&G theory that individuals use media for specific purposes.

The notion of meaning and significance is the final aspect of *The Secret*’s ability to function as would a religion. Frankl argues that “man’s search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life” (p. 99). Some individuals find meaning and significance in material goods (such as cars, jobs, or concert tickets, as described in the data) and others find significance in more spiritual desires (“I [asked] God to give me something that I too could keep with me at all times as a reminder that everything I desire in life will come and to never stop believing”). Given that 98% of all narratives in this research addressed the manifestation of something significant to the individual, and that many individuals referenced a Divine Being, it can be concluded, within a uses and gratifications framework, that individuals working with the principles in *The Secret* are doing so within a newly defined religious framework. Many authors of narratives analyzed in this research may not have self-identified themselves as “religious” in reference to *The Secret*. However, based on the proposed definition of religion, it is reasonable to suggest that *The*

Secret functions, as Geertz and Hoover propose, as a system which establishes powerful, realistic motivation and feels significant to those who believe in it. Further, the online posting of stories may help people feel a sense of connection with others that they may not get from a more traditional form of religion that meets face-to-face or on a regular basis. Indeed, even amongst the sample of posts examined for this study, references to the online community are made, for example, “And so I kept coming back to this site to read all the stories... and they all helped me...”

Conclusion

In summary, data suggests that those posting narratives or stories in the Faith category on *The Secret*'s website are enthusiastic about the principles and philosophy outlined in the media suite. Analysis of the narratives suggests that the audience of this media who embrace the principles do so in the context of a religious framework. This framework is attractive to the audience because it provides the opportunity to apply a set of beliefs to one's life. The spiritual aspect of the media may also be one of the more significant means of attraction for the audience; the book and DVD both make reference to God/The Universe, and audience members refer to such a Divine entity in their narratives. Given that 92% of Americans report that they believe in God (Pew Forum, 2008, Q. 30), the opportunity to incorporate a non-dogmatic yet spiritual framework to one's life may be of specific importance. Finally, the teachings in *The Secret* provide support for individuals as they seek meaning and significance in their lives, primarily by providing a clear outline for attaining goals. This media, then, can function as a religion, for the majority of those analyzed in this sample use it as a system which feels real, powerful, pervasive, and motivating.

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