

Exploring the Impact of Social Media Usage on Consumer Engagement: A Regression-Based Empirical Study

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Abstract:

Brands invest heavily in building audiences on social media, yet a large following does not guarantee that people actually care about the brand. This study asks why some social media use turns into genuine consumer engagement while other use does not. Drawing on the Stimulus-Organism-Response (S-O-R) framework and Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), it proposes that social media usage (usage intensity, usage frequency and brand interaction) shapes consumer engagement (cognitive processing, affection and activation) mainly through the gratifications people receive from social platforms, namely entertainment, information and empowerment. Usage mode, which covers consumption, contribution and creation, is tested as a moderator of the link between usage and gratifications. Survey data were collected from 287 active social media users through a structured questionnaire on a five-point Likert scale and analysed using reliability analysis, correlation analysis, multiple regression and the PROCESS macro. Social media usage predicted both gratifications ($\beta = 0.527$) and consumer engagement ($\beta = 0.558$). Gratifications partially mediated the usage–engagement relationship and accounted for about 42% of the total effect. The effect of usage on gratifications was more than twice as strong for respondents high in usage mode ($B = 0.735$) as for those low in it ($B = 0.301$). All five hypotheses were supported. The findings suggest that what consumers get from social media, and how actively they take part, matters more than the time they spend there.

Keywords: social media usage; consumer engagement; gratifications; usage mode; uses and gratifications theory; stimulus-organism-response; regression analysis

1. Introduction

Social media is now part of everyday life for most people. By April 2026, there were about 5.79 billion active social media user identities worldwide, close to 70% of the global population (DataReportal, 2026). For marketers, these platforms are much more than an advertising space. They work at the same time as a news feed, a shop window, a source of entertainment and a place where people talk to each other about products (Appel et al., 2020). What began as a way to keep in touch with friends now influences how product information spreads, how brand reputations are built and how the meaning of a brand is worked out between firms and their customers (Barger et al., 2016). As a result, the customer relationship no longer ends at the point of sale. It continues as a public conversation that firms can shape but cannot fully control.

This is one reason why consumer engagement has become a central topic in digital marketing research (Lim et al., 2022). Engagement tells firms something that sales figures cannot: how much attention, emotional attachment and effort a consumer puts into a brand (Dessart et al., 2016). Engaged consumers think more carefully about brand information, react more positively to brand messages and are more willing to recommend the brand to others (Hollebeek et al., 2019). A meta-analysis of social media studies also links engagement to firm performance, behavioural intention and word of mouth (Santini et al., 2020). Because these benefits build up over time, engagement is increasingly seen as a long-term asset rather than a short-term campaign metric (Bilro & Loureiro, 2020; Rasool et al., 2020).

The difficulty lies in the link between usage and engagement. Many firms assume that a stronger social media presence and heavier use by consumers will automatically lead to more engagement. The evidence does not fully

support this assumption. A person may spend hours on Instagram every day and still scroll past brand posts without noticing them, while someone who uses social media only occasionally may be closely involved with a few favourite brands. Being exposed to content and being involved with a brand are different things, and using time spent as a stand-in for engagement mixes the two up (Voorveld et al., 2018).

This study argues that the relationship is largely indirect. Social media usage, made up of usage intensity, usage frequency and brand interaction, is treated as an external stimulus. Rather than acting on engagement directly, this stimulus works mostly through the psychological states it creates. The S-O-R framework suits this argument because it holds that stimuli in the environment shape behaviour by first changing a person's inner state (Kamboj et al., 2018). In the present model, the gratifications a consumer gets from social media form the organism, and consumer engagement is the response.

Uses and Gratifications Theory explains what this inner state contains. UGT views audiences as active users who choose media to meet particular needs, not as passive receivers of messages (Dolan et al., 2016). On social media, three gratifications stand out. Entertainment is the enjoyment and relaxation a platform offers. Information is its value as a source of knowledge about products, offers and categories. Empowerment is the feeling of having a voice and some influence, which comes from the fact that consumer opinions are visible to firms and to other users (Buzeta et al., 2020). Consumers who receive these benefits have good reason to keep paying attention to the brands and platforms that provide them, so gratifications offer a plausible route through which usage becomes engagement (Bauer & Tian, 2024).

People also take part in social media in very different ways. Some mainly consume content, reading and watching without leaving any trace. Others contribute by commenting, rating, sharing or replying. A smaller group creates original content, such as reviews, photos and videos that feature brands (Schivinski et al., 2016). These modes involve rising levels of effort, and the same amount of usage may bring quite different psychological returns depending on which mode a person follows. Empowerment in particular is unlikely to come from silent scrolling. For this reason, usage mode is modelled here as a moderator of the path from usage to gratifications, not simply as a way of describing respondents.

Using survey data from 287 active social media users and a regression-based approach, the study examines five questions: whether social media usage predicts gratifications; whether gratifications predict consumer engagement; whether usage has a direct effect on engagement; whether gratifications mediate the usage–engagement link; and whether usage mode changes the strength of the usage–gratifications link. The rest of the paper sets out the research gap and objectives, reviews the theory and develops the hypotheses, describes the method, presents the results and discusses what they mean for theory and practice.

2. Research Gap

Research on social media engagement has grown quickly over the past decade (Lim & Rasul, 2022). Even so, three gaps motivate the present study.

First, S-O-R and UGT have mostly developed side by side rather than together. S-O-R studies show that internal states sit between digital stimuli and consumer responses, but they often say little about what those states actually are (Kamboj et al., 2018). UGT studies identify the needs people bring to social media, but they less often follow those needs through to engagement measured in several dimensions (Dolan et al., 2016; Kaur et al., 2020). Combining the two theories allows the organism in the S-O-R chain to be defined in a theoretically grounded way.

Second, social media usage is often measured as a single overall figure, usually time spent or how often a person logs in. Such measures hide the difference between general platform activity and activity directed at brands, even though the latter is more likely to be linked to brand engagement. This study treats usage intensity, usage frequency and brand interaction as related but separate facets of usage.

Third, when participation styles are studied, they are usually used to profile or segment respondents rather than as variables that change the relationships between constructs (Eigenraam et al., 2018; Schivinski et al., 2016). Testing consumption, contribution and creation as a moderator turns a descriptive typology into a boundary

condition. It also allows a direct test of whether deeper participation changes the psychological value people get from their usage.

To address these gaps, the study develops and tests one integrated model in which social media usage predicts gratifications, gratifications predict consumer engagement, gratifications carry part of the effect of usage on engagement, and usage mode moderates the usage–gratifications link.

3. Research Objectives

The study has the following objectives:

1. To examine the effect of social media usage on the gratifications consumers derive from social media.
2. To examine the effect of gratifications on consumer engagement.
3. To examine the direct effect of social media usage on consumer engagement.
4. To test whether gratifications mediate the relationship between social media usage and consumer engagement.
5. To test whether usage mode moderates the relationship between social media usage and gratifications.

4. Theoretical Background and Hypothesis Development

4.1 The Stimulus-Organism-Response Framework

The S-O-R framework proposes that features of an environment act as stimuli that change a person's cognitive and emotional state, and that this changed state then guides behaviour. The framework is popular in digital marketing research because it fits settings in which firms design the environment while consumers decide freely how to respond. Kamboj et al. (2018) applied it to brand communities on social media and found that participation affected brand co-creation through consumers' psychological reactions rather than directly. Similar applications appear in social commerce and online brand engagement research, where features of the digital environment influence engagement only after consumers have evaluated them (Cheung et al., 2021; Nadeem et al., 2021).

In the present model, social media usage in its three facets is the stimulus, the gratifications obtained are the organism, and consumer engagement, made up of cognitive processing, affection and activation, is the response. One implication follows directly. If gratifications carry part of the effect, the direct path from usage to engagement should become weaker once gratifications are added to the model, which is the pattern the mediation hypothesis predicts.

4.2 Uses and Gratifications Theory

UGT treats media use as purposeful. People are expected to choose channels that meet needs they are aware of, and to keep using channels that meet those needs. The theory has remained useful in social media research because it can explain things that exposure-based models cannot, such as why consumers actively look for branded content and why different platforms produce different kinds of engagement (Kaur et al., 2020; Voorveld et al., 2018).

Three gratifications are examined here. Entertainment refers to the pleasure, escape and relaxation people get from social media, and it has been linked to engagement behaviour across many types of platform (Dolan et al., 2019). Information refers to the value of social media as a source of product knowledge, comparisons and other users' experiences, and it is closely tied to the cognitive side of engagement (Buzeta et al., 2020). Empowerment refers to the feeling that one's opinion counts, which comes from the visibility of consumer voices and from the way firms respond to them. Of the three, empowerment is the most specific to interactive media, since traditional channels gave consumers no comparable voice (Cheung et al., 2020). Recent evidence from a large survey of WeChat users confirms that entertainment, information and empowerment are each significantly associated with consumer engagement (Bauer & Tian, 2024).

4.3 Social Media Usage and Gratifications

In principle, usage and gratification influence each other, but in a cross-sectional study the direction from usage to gratification is the easier one to interpret. Regular use provides the exposure through which gratifications are realised. A person who rarely opens an app has few chances to be entertained by it, to learn from it or to feel heard on it. Usage intensity shows how far social media is built into a person's daily routine and sense of self, and greater integration widens the range of rewarding experiences. Usage frequency increases the number of those experiences. Brand interaction is the most relevant facet for this study. Following brand pages, reacting to brand posts and joining brand-related discussions put the consumer in direct contact with useful information and with chances to speak up (Khan, 2022; Tafesse & Wien, 2018). Earlier studies also connect social media activity with the fulfilment of entertainment, information and social needs (Casaló et al., 2017; Kaur et al., 2020). Therefore:

H1: Social media usage has a significant positive effect on gratifications.

4.4 Gratifications and Consumer Engagement

Following Dessart et al. (2016) and Hollebeek et al. (2019), consumer engagement is treated as having three dimensions. Cognitive processing is the attention and thought a consumer gives to brand content. Affection is the positive feeling the consumer holds towards the brand. Activation is the energy, effort and time the consumer is willing to spend on the brand.

Each gratification links naturally to one or more of these dimensions. Entertainment creates positive feelings, and repeated enjoyable exposure can pass some of that warmth on to the brands that appear in the experience (Prentice et al., 2019). Information encourages cognitive processing, because it gives consumers something worth paying attention to and thinking about (Gómez et al., 2019). Empowerment supports activation, since consumers who believe their input is noticed are more willing to put effort into giving it (Simon & Tossan, 2018). Studies in retail, hospitality and online community settings report consistent positive links between gratification and engagement (Islam et al., 2018; Liu et al., 2021; Rather et al., 2019; Vohra & Bhardwaj, 2019). Hollebeek and Macky (2019) also argue that content offering informational and experiential value is the main way digital communication builds engagement, and recent qualitative work shows that informational and entertaining brand content lead to different, deliberate forms of engagement (Krowinska & Dineva, 2025). Hence:

H2: Gratifications have a significant positive effect on consumer engagement.

4.5 Social Media Usage and Consumer Engagement

A direct path from usage to engagement is also expected. Apart from any gratification, repeated exposure to a brand's social media presence makes the brand more familiar, and familiarity makes later brand messages easier to process. Frequent interaction with a brand can also turn into a habit, so that responding to brand content becomes routine rather than a deliberate choice (Osei-Frimpong & McLean, 2018; Zhang et al., 2017). Studies of social media marketing activities report direct effects on consumer-brand engagement even after psychological mediators are taken into account (Cheung et al., 2020; Khan, 2022). The direct path is therefore kept in the model, although it is expected to be only partly independent of gratifications.

H3: Social media usage has a significant positive effect on consumer engagement.

4.6 The Moderating Role of Usage Mode

Usage mode describes the form that participation takes. Consumption means receiving content without any visible response. Contribution means reacting to content made by others through comments, ratings, shares or replies. Creation means producing original content in which brands appear (Buzeta et al., 2020; Schivinski et al., 2016, 2020). The three modes involve increasing effort and increasing visibility to other users.

The argument for moderation is that the same amount of usage can produce different levels of gratification depending on the mode. Consumption can deliver entertainment easily, because enjoyment does not require any exchange with others. It offers less depth of information, however, and almost no empowerment, since a person who never responds gets no signal that their view matters. Contribution adds reciprocity: a reply that gets

answered, a review that others read or a comment that attracts agreement all show the consumer that they have some influence. Creation goes further. People who produce content receive the most direct feedback on how far their views travel, and the effort of making content exposes them to more concentrated information (Dolan et al., 2019; Eigenraam et al., 2018). The slope linking usage to gratifications should therefore become steeper as participation becomes more active.

H4: Usage mode significantly moderates the relationship between social media usage and gratifications, such that the relationship is stronger at higher levels of participation.

5. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework brings S-O-R and UGT together in one model. Social media usage is the stimulus, gratifications are the organism, consumer engagement is the response, and usage mode acts as a boundary condition on the path from stimulus to organism. Table 1 summarises the constructs and their dimensions.

Table 1. Constructs, Theoretical Role and Dimensions

Construct	Role in Model	Dimensions
Social Media Usage	Stimulus (S)	Usage intensity; usage frequency; brand interaction
Gratifications	Organism (O)	Entertainment; information; empowerment
Consumer Engagement	Response (R)	Cognitive processing; affection; activation
Usage Mode	Moderator	Consumption; contribution; creation

The model contains three sets of relationships. The indirect path runs from social media usage through gratifications to consumer engagement (H1, H2 and H5). The direct path runs from social media usage to consumer engagement (H3). The interaction between social media usage and usage mode predicts gratifications (H4). Figure 1 presents the proposed model.

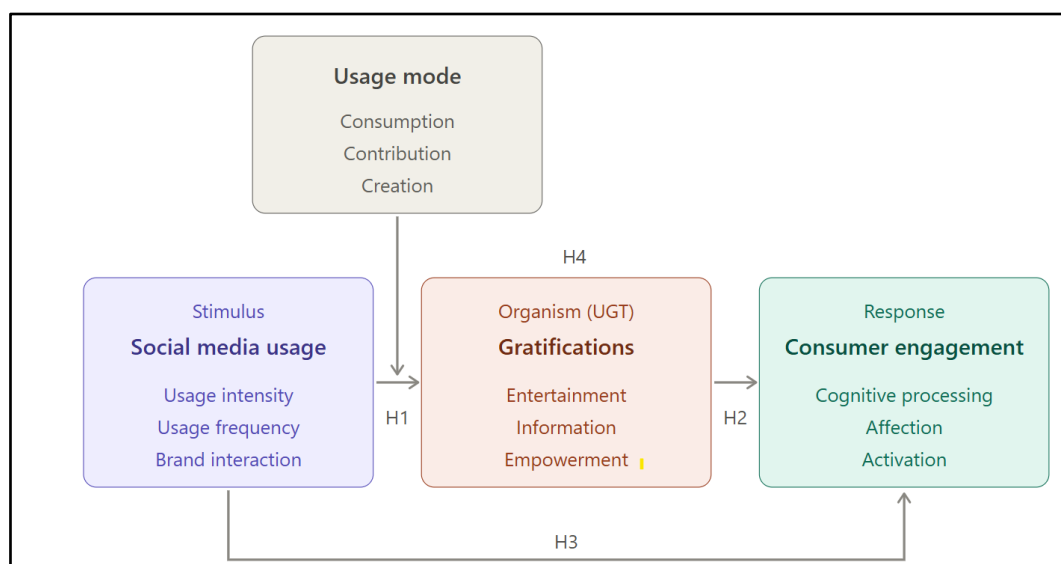


Figure 1. Proposed Conceptual Model

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Research Design

The study uses a quantitative, cross-sectional design. This design suits hypothesis testing where the aim is to estimate the size and significance of specified relationships rather than to build new theory. Primary data were collected through a structured, self-administered questionnaire. A cross-sectional design fits the research questions, although it limits causal claims, as discussed in Section 10.

6.2 Population, Sampling and Sample Size

The target population was active social media users who come across brand-related content. Two screening questions were used. Respondents had to use at least one social media platform regularly, and they had to have followed, viewed or interacted with brand content in the previous three months. People who did not meet both conditions were excluded, because the engagement questions would not have been meaningful for them.

Purposive sampling, supported by referrals from initial respondents, was used because no complete sampling frame exists for this population. After incomplete responses and responses showing obvious patterns (for example, the same answer to every item) were removed, 287 valid responses remained for analysis. This sample is adequate for the planned analysis. A common rule of thumb for multiple regression is at least 10 to 15 cases per predictor, and the largest model in this study contains only three predictors (Hair et al., 2019). The sample also exceeds the minimum sizes recommended for detecting medium effects in survey research at conventional levels of statistical power (Memon et al., 2020).

6.3 Instrument Development and Measurement

All constructs were measured with multi-item scales adapted from validated earlier studies, with the wording adjusted to the social media context. Responses were recorded on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Table 2 lists the sources of the measures, and the full set of items appears in the Appendix.

Table 2. Measurement of Constructs

Construct	Dimensions	No. of Items	Adapted From
Social Media Usage	Usage intensity, usage frequency, brand interaction	9	Schivinski et al. (2016); Tafesse and Wien (2018)
Gratifications	Entertainment, information, empowerment	9	Dolan et al. (2016); Buzeta et al. (2020)
Consumer Engagement	Cognitive processing, affection, activation	9	Dessart et al. (2016); Hollebeek et al. (2019)
Usage Mode	Consumption, contribution, creation	9	Schivinski et al. (2016); Eigenraam et al. (2018)

Subject experts reviewed the questionnaire for content validity. It was then pilot-tested with a small group of respondents, and unclear items were reworded before the main survey. Questions on age, gender, education, occupation, preferred platform and daily usage time were placed at the end of the questionnaire.

6.4 Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analysed in SPSS in four steps. First, internal consistency was checked with Cronbach's alpha, and item scores were averaged to form a composite score for each construct. Second, Pearson correlations were examined to confirm that the constructs were related in the expected directions and to check for multicollinearity. Third, four multiple regression models were estimated to test H1 to H4. Fourth, the PROCESS macro (Hayes, 2022) was used to test the indirect effect with bootstrap confidence intervals (Model 4) and to estimate conditional effects for the moderation analysis (Model 1). Social media usage and usage mode were mean-centred before the interaction term was formed.

7. Data Analysis and Results

7.1 Respondent Profile

Table 3. Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 287)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	135	47.0%
	Female	147	51.2%
	Other	5	1.7%
Age	Below 20	22	7.7%
	20–29	165	57.5%
	30–39	95	33.1%
	40 and above	5	1.7%
Daily usage	Under 1 hour	22	7.7%
	1–3 hours	158	55.1%
	Over 3 hours	107	37.3%
Preferred platform	Instagram	84	29.3%
	YouTube	73	25.4%
	Facebook	42	14.6%
	X (formerly Twitter)	21	7.3%
	Other	67	23.3%
Total		287	100%

Note. Percentages may not add up to exactly 100 because of rounding.

Table 3 shows that the sample was fairly balanced by gender, with 51.2% female and 47.0% male respondents. More than half of the respondents were aged 20–29 (57.5%), and about a third were aged 30–39 (33.1%). Most respondents (55.1%) spent one to three hours a day on social media, and a sizeable group (37.3%) spent more

than three hours. Instagram was the most preferred platform (29.3%), followed by YouTube (25.4%). The sample therefore consists mainly of young and active users. This suits the aims of the study, but it should be kept in mind when generalising the results.

7.2 Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Table 4 reports the means, standard deviations and reliability coefficients. Cronbach's alpha values of 0.70 or above indicate acceptable internal consistency and allow items to be averaged into composite scores for the regression analysis (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics and Reliability

Construct	No. of Items	Mean	SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Social Media Usage	9	3.201	0.971	0.943
Gratifications	9	3.152	0.925	0.936
Consumer Engagement	9	3.195	0.878	0.926
Usage Mode	9	3.220	0.970	0.942

All four scales showed high internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha ranged from 0.926 for consumer engagement to 0.943 for social media usage, well above the usual threshold of 0.70. All means were slightly above the scale midpoint of 3, ranging from 3.152 for gratifications to 3.220 for usage mode, which points to moderate levels of each construct in the sample. Standard deviations between 0.878 and 0.971 show a reasonable spread of responses. The scales are therefore reliable enough to be used in the correlation, regression, mediation and moderation analyses that follow.

7.3 Correlation Analysis

Table 5 presents the Pearson correlation matrix. Significant positive correlations among the main constructs would give initial support to the proposed relationships, and coefficients below 0.80 would suggest that multicollinearity is unlikely to distort the regression estimates.

Table 5. Correlation Matrix

Construct	1	2	3	4
1. Social Media Usage	1			
2. Gratifications	0.527**	1		
3. Consumer Engagement	0.558**	0.618**	1	
4. Usage Mode	-0.097	0.208**	0.044	1

Note. ** $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

Social media usage was positively and significantly related to gratifications ($r = 0.527$, $p < .01$) and to consumer engagement ($r = 0.558$, $p < .01$). The strongest correlation was between gratifications and consumer engagement ($r = 0.618$, $p < .01$), meaning that respondents who got more out of social media also tended to be more engaged with brands. Usage mode was positively related to gratifications ($r = 0.208$, $p < .01$), but it was not significantly related to social media usage ($r = -0.097$, $p > .05$) or to consumer engagement ($r = 0.044$, $p > .05$). This pattern is relevant for the moderation test: how actively people participate appears to be largely independent of how much they use social media, yet it is still linked to what they get out of it. All correlations were below 0.80, so serious multicollinearity was not expected.

7.4 Regression Analysis

Table 6 summarises the four regression models. Model 1 tests H1 and Model 2 tests H3. Model 3 adds gratifications to Model 2 in order to test H2 and to check whether the usage coefficient drops, which would point to mediation. Model 4 adds usage mode and the interaction term to test H4. Standardised coefficients (β) are reported.

Table 6. Summary of Regression Results

Model	Dependent Variable	Predictor(s)	β	t	p	R ²	F
1	Gratifications	Social media usage	0.527	10.471	< .001	0.278	109.59
2	Consumer engagement	Social media usage	0.558	11.362	< .001	0.311	128.86
3	Consumer engagement	Social media usage	0.322	6.261	< .001	0.457	119.34
		Gratifications	0.448	8.700	< .001		
4	Gratifications	Social media usage	0.543	11.775	< .001	0.404	63.84
		Usage mode	0.250	5.415	< .001		
		Social media usage $\times$ Usage mode	0.241	5.251	< .001		

Note. N = 287. All F values are significant at $p < .001$; degrees of freedom are (1, 285) for Models 1 and 2, (2, 284) for Model 3 and (3, 283) for Model 4. ΔR^2 for the interaction term in Model 4 = 0.058.

Model 1 shows that social media usage is a significant positive predictor of gratifications ($\beta = 0.527$, $p < .001$) and explains about 28% of their variance, so H1 is supported. In Model 2, social media usage also predicts consumer engagement ($\beta = 0.558$, $p < .001$; $R^2 = 0.311$), which supports H3.

When gratifications are added in Model 3, they emerge as a significant predictor of consumer engagement ($\beta = 0.448$, $p < .001$), supporting H2. The model now explains 45.7% of the variance in engagement, an increase of 14.5 percentage points over Model 2. The coefficient for social media usage remains significant but falls from 0.558 to 0.322. This drop is the pattern expected under partial mediation, which is tested formally in Section 7.5. The variance inflation factor in Model 3 was 1.38, far below the usual cut-off values, so multicollinearity is not a concern (Hair et al., 2019).

In Model 4, social media usage ($\beta = 0.543$, $p < .001$), usage mode ($\beta = 0.250$, $p < .001$) and their interaction ($\beta = 0.241$, $p < .001$) all significantly predict gratifications. Adding the interaction term raises the explained variance by 5.8 percentage points, from $R^2 = 0.346$ to $R^2 = 0.404$. Usage mode therefore moderates the relationship between social media usage and gratifications, which supports H4. The positive sign of the interaction means that the effect of usage on gratifications grows stronger as usage mode increases. Overall, the regression results support H1, H2, H3 and H4.

7.5 Mediation Analysis

The mediating role of gratifications (H5) was tested by estimating the indirect effect with bootstrap confidence intervals in PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022). Table 7 reports the total, direct and indirect effects as unstandardised coefficients. An indirect effect is considered significant when its 95% confidence interval does not include zero. If the direct effect also stays significant, the mediation is partial; if it does not, the mediation is full (Hayes, 2022).

Table 7. Mediation Analysis: Social Media Usage → Gratifications → Consumer Engagement

Effect	Coefficient (B)	SE	LLCI	ULCI
Total effect	0.505	0.044	0.418	0.593
Direct effect	0.292	0.047	0.200	0.383
Indirect effect via gratifications	0.214	0.030	0.156	0.275

Note. LLCI and ULCI are the lower and upper limits of the 95% confidence interval. The SE of the indirect effect is a bootstrap standard error.

Social media usage has a significant total effect on consumer engagement ($B = 0.505$, 95% CI [0.418, 0.593]). With gratifications in the model, the direct effect falls to $B = 0.292$ but remains significant (95% CI [0.200, 0.383]). The indirect effect through gratifications is also significant ($B = 0.214$, BootSE = 0.030, 95% CI [0.156, 0.275]), because the interval does not include zero. H5 is therefore supported. Since the direct effect remains significant, the mediation is partial. Roughly 42% of the total effect of social media usage on consumer engagement ($0.214 \div 0.505$) passes through gratifications, and the remaining 58% is direct.

7.6 Moderation Analysis

To understand the interaction more clearly, the conditional effect of social media usage on gratifications was estimated at low (one standard deviation below the mean), average (the mean) and high (one standard deviation above the mean) levels of usage mode using PROCESS Model 1. Table 8 reports these effects, and Figure 2 plots them.

Table 8. Conditional Effect of Social Media Usage on Gratifications at Different Levels of Usage Mode

Level of Usage Mode	Effect (B)	SE	t	p
Low (−1 SD)	0.301	0.061	4.896	< .001
Average (mean)	0.518	0.044	11.775	< .001
High (+1 SD)	0.735	0.059	12.408	< .001

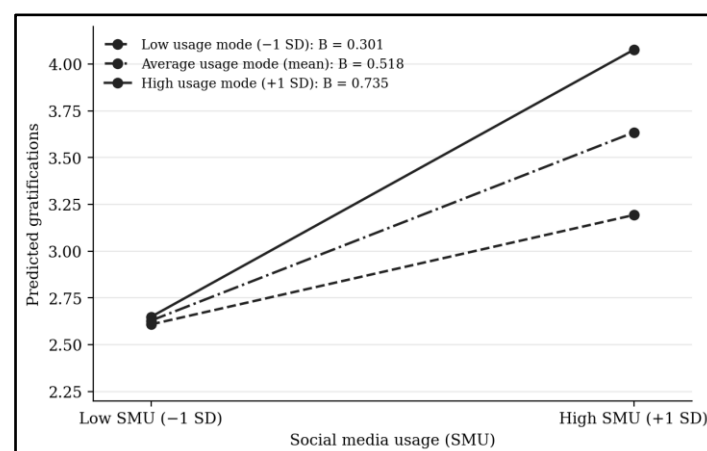


Figure 2. Simple Slopes of Social Media Usage on Gratifications at Three Levels of Usage Mode

The effect of social media usage on gratifications is positive and significant at all three levels of usage mode, but its size changes considerably. At a low level of usage mode, the effect is $B = 0.301$ ($p < .001$). At the mean it rises to $B = 0.518$ ($p < .001$), and at a high level it reaches $B = 0.735$ ($p < .001$), almost two and a half times the effect at the low level. Figure 2 also shows that the three lines start close together when usage is low and move apart as usage increases. In practical terms, the way people participate makes little difference to the gratifications of light users but a large difference for heavy users. This pattern supports the moderating role of usage mode proposed in H4.

7.7 Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Table 9. Summary of Hypotheses

Hypothesis	Statement	Result
H1	Social media usage has a significant positive effect on gratifications.	Supported
H2	Gratifications have a significant positive effect on consumer engagement.	Supported
H3	Social media usage has a significant positive effect on consumer engagement.	Supported
H4	Usage mode moderates the relationship between social media usage and gratifications.	Supported
H5	Gratifications mediate the relationship between social media usage and consumer engagement.	Supported (partial mediation)

All five hypotheses are supported. Social media usage increases both gratifications and consumer engagement, and gratifications in turn increase engagement. Because gratifications carry part of the effect of usage on engagement, usage influences engagement both directly and indirectly. Usage mode strengthens the link between usage and gratifications.

8. Discussion

This study set out to explain how social media usage leads to consumer engagement, and the results give a fairly clear picture. Usage matters, but much of its influence depends on what consumers get out of their time on social media and on how actively they take part.

The support for H1 shows that social media usage works as an effective stimulus for gratification. This is consistent with the UGT view that people keep using media that meet their needs (Dolan et al., 2016; Kaur et al., 2020). Usage explained about 28% of the variance in gratifications. That is a substantial share, but it also leaves most of the variance unexplained. Spending time on social media creates the opportunity to be entertained, informed or empowered, but it does not guarantee any of these outcomes. This fits the argument of Tafesse and Wien (2018) and Khan (2022) that the character of social media activity, and especially interaction with brands, matters as much as its amount.

Gratifications were the strongest predictor of engagement in the study ($r = 0.618$; $\beta = 0.448$ in Model 3). This places them among the most immediate drivers of engagement and agrees with earlier findings that motivational and experiential states drive cognitive, emotional and behavioural involvement with brands (Dessart et al., 2016; Liu et al., 2021; Prentice et al., 2019). It is also in line with recent evidence that entertainment, information and empowerment are each tied to engagement on social platforms (Bauer & Tian, 2024). For consumers, what counts is not whether a brand is present on social media, but whether that presence gives them something worth their attention.

The comparison of Models 2 and 3, together with the bootstrap results, lies at the centre of the study's theoretical argument. The direct effect of usage stayed significant after gratifications were added, and the indirect effect was also significant, so gratifications mediate the relationship partially rather than fully. This supports the S-O-R view that the effect of a stimulus on a response runs largely, though not only, through internal states (Kamboj et al., 2018; Nadeem et al., 2021). The remaining direct effect, about 58% of the total, probably reflects familiarity and habit. People who see a brand often and interact with it regularly may engage with it partly out of routine, without consciously weighing what they gain (Osei-Frimpong & McLean, 2018; Zhang et al., 2017). Both routes appear to matter, and marketers who focus only on reach, or only on content value, will see just part of the picture.

The moderation result is probably the most useful finding for practice. The effect of usage on gratifications was about two and a half times stronger for respondents high in usage mode than for those low in it. Among light users, participation style made little difference; among heavy users, it made a large one. This extends the work of Schivinski et al. (2016) and Eigenraam et al. (2018) by showing that participation typologies do more than describe segments. They change how much value people draw from the same amount of usage. The correlations add a further point. Usage mode was not related to how much people used social media, and it had no direct relationship with engagement. Its role seems to be to amplify the gratifications that come from usage rather than to drive engagement on its own. Active participation, in other words, is not simply a by-product of spending more time online.

9. Implications

9.1 Theoretical Implications

The study makes three contributions to theory. First, it brings S-O-R and UGT together in a single model that can be tested empirically, using UGT to define the organism component that S-O-R leaves open. The partial mediation found here suggests that this combined model explains the usage–engagement link better than a direct-effects model alone. Second, it separates social media usage into intensity, frequency and brand interaction, which makes it possible to distinguish general platform activity from brand-focused activity. Third, it treats participation style as a moderator rather than a descriptive category and shows that the value consumers draw from social media depends on how they take part as well as on how much they use it.

9.2 Managerial Implications

For practitioners, the results suggest that reach and impression figures are weak indicators of engagement. They measure exposure but say nothing about whether consumers gained anything from it. Since about 42% of the effect of usage on engagement ran through gratifications, content should be judged by whether it entertains, informs or gives consumers a sense of voice. The moderation result points in the same direction. Features that invite a response, such as questions, polls, visible replies to comments and reposting of user-generated content, may raise the return on an existing audience more efficiently than simply trying to grow that audience. Because the moderating effect was strongest among heavy users, such efforts are likely to pay off most with a brand's most frequent followers. Grouping consumers by how they participate, and not only by demographics, would also help. Audiences who mainly consume may respond best to entertaining material, while contributors and creators may respond better to direct invitations to take part (Krowinska & Dineva, 2025).

10. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be kept in mind when reading these findings. First, the cross-sectional design shows associations but cannot establish causal order. A longitudinal or experimental design would allow firmer conclusions about the direction of the usage–gratification relationship. Second, all measures came from the same respondents at the same point in time, so common method bias cannot be ruled out. Future studies could use procedural and statistical remedies or combine survey responses with data from other sources (Jordan & Troth, 2020). Third, self-reported usage is open to recall error, and behavioural or platform-based data would provide a stronger basis.

Fourth, the sample was drawn purposively and consisted mostly of young adults, which limits how far the findings can be generalised to all social media users. Fifth, usage mode was measured as a composite of consumption, contribution and creation. A high score therefore reflects a generally higher level of participation rather than a shift towards one particular mode. Testing the three modes separately would show whether contribution and creation drive the moderating effect, as the theory suggests. For the same reason, the analysis was carried out at the construct level, so the proposed links between specific gratifications and specific engagement dimensions (Section 4.4) were not tested directly.

Sixth, social media was treated as a single environment, even though platforms differ considerably in what they allow users to do and in the engagement they support (Voorveld et al., 2018). Replication on specific platforms is therefore needed. Finally, only three gratifications were examined. Future research could add social interaction, rewards or self-presentation motives, and could test other moderators such as brand trust (Chahal & Rani, 2017), product involvement or cultural background.

11. Conclusion

This study examined how social media usage turns into consumer engagement, starting from the idea that the relationship is neither simply direct nor the same for everyone. By combining the S-O-R framework with Uses and Gratifications Theory, it proposed that usage affects engagement through the gratifications consumers obtain, and that the strength of this process depends on how actively they participate. Data from 287 active social media users supported all five hypotheses. Usage predicted both gratifications and engagement, gratifications carried about 42% of the effect of usage on engagement, and usage mode made the link between usage and gratifications considerably stronger.

The main lesson is that attention should move from how much consumers use social media to what they get from it and how they take part. For researchers, the study offers a clearly defined internal mechanism for a relationship that has often been treated loosely. For marketers, it suggests that the key question is not how large a brand's audience is, but whether that audience is given something worth engaging with and a real reason to respond.

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