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Exploring the Interrelationship between Customer Engagement, Customer Gratification, and Customer Empowerment in the Context of Social Media Marketing

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The advent of social media platforms has brought about a revolution in marketing strategies in this era of digital transformation. These platforms have enabled firms to cultivate interactive relationships with their customers. The purpose of this study is to analyze the interrelationship between customer involvement, customer gratification, and consumer empowerment in the context of social media marketing. The research makes use of primary data acquired from five hundred active social media users who come from a variety of demographics and platforms. The research is conducted using a mixed-method approach. The results of structural equation modeling (SEM) indicate that there is a substantial positive connection between the three variables. This suggests that gratification has a considerable influence on engagement, and engagement, in turn, generates empowerment. The findings have strategic significance for marketers who are looking to increase customer-driven innovation, user advocacy, and brand loyalty through the usage of social networks. **Keywords:** : Customer Engagement, Customer Gratification, Customer Empowerment, Social Media Marketing, Digital Marketing Strategy, Consumer Behavior, Brand Loyalty

INTRODUCTION

Through the course of the last ten years, social media has brought about a revolution in the manner in which customers engage with companies [1]. This has resulted in the transformation of conventional marketing communication into a dynamic, real-time, two-way conversation. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (X), YouTube, and TikTok are just some of the platforms that have made it possible for marketers to connect with audiences all over the world with an unparalleled level of convenience and customisation [2-6]. The platforms in question are not only promotional tools; rather, they are increasingly being regarded as strategic forums for participation, community building, and the empowerment of customers.

Customers are no longer merely passive recipients of marketing messages in this digitally networked environment; rather, they are active participants in the development of content, the sharing of feedback, and the advocacy of brands. Because of this, the focus of marketers has evolved from broadcasting in a one-way direction to cultivating interactive connections with customers, which ultimately results in customer loyalty, trust, and the co-creation of value. As a result, the dynamic relationship that exists between customer pleasure, engagement, and empowerment has become an important sector of focus in the field of current marketing research [7].

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The term "customer gratification" is used in the context of social media to describe the happiness that consumers experience as a result of interaction with material that is pertinent, personalized, amusing, and socially engaged. This pleasure, which is derived from the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), is what motivates not only consumption but also involvement and interaction with the content. Users are driven by a wide variety of demands, including the need to obtain information, engage in social connection, enjoy enjoyable activities, escape reality, or express their identities. These requirements are frequently satisfied by the curated digital experiences that are provided by companies [8-12].

User engagement, which is defined here as the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral investment a customer takes in brand interactions across social media channels, is more likely to occur once customers have been satisfied with the brand's products or services. Included in this category are things like likes, shares, comments, interactions with stories, and mentions of brands. Not only does engagement serve as a measure of interest, but it also serves as a forerunner to increasing levels of involvement and developing an emotional commitment to the brand.

An additional point to consider is that customer empowerment refers to a psychological condition in which customers have the perception that they have a voice, influence, and control in their interactions with a brand. Customers that are empowered are not just engaged; they also take initiative, provide feedback, contribute to product innovation, and act as champions for the brand. Enhanced brand loyalty, increased purchase intent, and the development of thriving brand communities are all potential outcomes that might result from empowerment [13].

The interaction between pleasure, engagement, and empowerment has not been properly examined, particularly in the context of social media marketing (SMM). This is despite the fact that these individual conceptions are extremely important. Studies that have been conducted up to now had a tendency to examine these components in isolation, frequently concentrating simply on the direct influence that engagement has on brand loyalty or pleasure on content consumption. This fragmented approach fails to take into account the transformative potential of engagement as a mechanism that acts as a mediator, transforming initial gratification into a more profound sense of influence and participation [14].

Furthermore, the relevance of these categories in emerging countries such as India, where the usage of social media is expanding rapidly but where cultural and economic dynamics are notably different from those in Western contexts, is yet underexplored. Both countries offer a one-of-a-kind chance to investigate the behavior of digital consumers across a wide range of technology access, cultural norms, and the level of maturity of their interactions with brands [15-17].

I.RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND HYPOTHESES

Objectives:

1. To assess the impact of customer gratification on customer engagement.

2. To evaluate the influence of engagement on customer empowerment.

3. To analyze the mediating role of engagement between gratification and empowerment.

Hypotheses:

- H1: Customer gratification positively influences customer engagement.

- H2: Customer engagement positively influences customer empowerment.

- H3: Customer engagement mediates the relationship between gratification and empowerment.

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II.RELATIONSHIP MARKETING AND CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

One can classify marketing techniques as either offensive or defensive, depending on their approach. Activities that are targeted at raising buy frequency, encouraging brand switching, and getting additional consumers are examples of offensive marketing strategies [18, 19]. On the other hand, activities that are intended at limiting customer exit and brand switching and boosting purchase frequency are examples of defensive marketing strategies. In the early conceptualizations of relationship management (RM), academics claimed that the domain of RM included both offensive and defensive marketing actions, with the goal of "establishing, developing, and maintaining successful relational exchanges." Despite the fact that the initial broad conceptualization of customer relationship management (RM) included both attracting new customers and retaining existing customers, subsequent research on RM has been largely limited to the study of defensive activities that aim to enhance and retain existing customers in buyer–seller relationships that are based on exchange [20]. We searched for relationship management papers that were published between the years 2006 and 2011 in twenty different marketing journals. These journals were either considered to be among the best marketing journals (such as the Journal of Marketing) or other journals that were more likely to discuss relationship-related subjects (such as the Journal of Relationship Marketing). Only twelve of the possible clients were included in the research conducted by the 140 empirical publications that were determined to be relevant. This demonstrates quite clearly that later research has mainly overlooked this component, despite the fact that the pioneers of value management identified enticing the customer as an objective of value management [21-24]. However, despite the fact that the service-dominant logic and the writings of Prahalad and Ramaswamy emphasize the significance of experiences of both existing and potential customers and the value configurations that result from those experiences, the focus of research on defensive strategies has led to the neglect of the study and use of RM principles in offensive marketing strategies aimed at customer acquisition. In accordance with the methodology proposed by Vargo and Lusch as well as Prahalad and Ramaswamy, it is recommended that research on RM should take into consideration the experiences of both current and prospective consumers, in addition to the value configurations that are obtained from these persons and their experiences [25-27].

III.CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

Following the completion of our exploratory work and the examination of the relevant literature, we will first define and delimit the nature of CE before moving on to discuss how CE is related to other notions. An individual's level of participation in and connection with an organization's offerings or activities is referred to as customer engagement (CE). This level of participation can be initiated by either the consumer or the company. Any of the individuals could be either existing or prospective clients. Cognitively, affectively, behaviorally, or socially, CE can present itself in a variety of domains. The cognitive and emotive components of customer experience (CE) take into account the experiences and emotions of customers, while the behavioral and social components capture the engagement of both existing and prospective customers, both inside and outside of the exchange circumstances [28]. The concept of corporate engagement (CE) refers to the connection that individuals develop with organizations as a result of their encounters with the activities and offerings of the business. Experience-based relationships are formed between potential or existing consumers via intense participation with the brand. These relationships are formed as a result of the one-of-a-kind experiences that customers have with the products and activities offered by the organization [29-33].

In the following section, we will analyze the relationship between CE and other significant marketing constructs, distinguish CE from other marketing constructs, and give some propositions and ideas. As much as the statements are based on theory and literature, it is impossible to avoid the fact that some of them are hypothetical. Furthermore, the variables that have been mentioned do not in any way make all of the options possible. We concentrate on this group for two reasons: (1) marketing professionals

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and academics have consistently seen them as important, and (2) we believe that CE is either affected by them or influences them in significant ways. We place particular emphasis on customer participation and involvement as antecedents to customer engagement (CE), and we consider value, trust, affective commitment, word of mouth, loyalty, and brand community involvement as consequences of customer engagement. Figure 1 depicts the theoretical model that was developed [34-39].
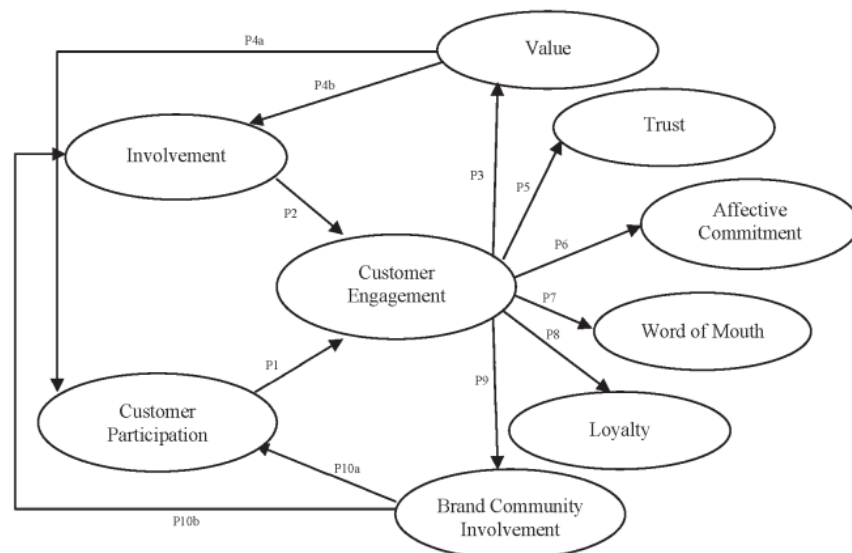

Figure 1. Theoretical Model of Customer Engagement

IV.METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Within the framework of social media marketing (SMM), this study makes use of a quantitative research approach in order to analyze the interrelationship that exists between consumer gratification, customer engagement, and customer empowerment. For the purpose of providing a snapshot of the experiences and perspectives of users, a cross-sectional survey method was utilized. This method involved the collection of data at a single moment in time. The design in question is particularly well-suited for the investigation of behavioral patterns and psychological constructs in the context of consumer research. It enables the drawing of conclusions that may be generalized through statistical inference. Because of the digital nature of the subject matter and the widespread use of the internet and social media platforms among the population that was being targeted, the online survey approach was chosen as the method of data collection methodology.

By ensuring the collection of structured and quantifiable data, this design makes it possible to conduct statistical analysis, which in turn enables the testing of hypotheses that have been offered and the establishment of causal connections among the variables that are being studied. In addition, the research makes use of a deductive reasoning technique, beginning with theory and progressing to the creation of hypotheses and the confirmation of results through empirical evidence. This methodology is suitable for confirming already established models and theories in a new setting.

Sample and Data Collection

- **Target Population**

The target market consisted of active users of social media sites, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), LinkedIn, and YouTube, who have engaged with brand content through actions such as like,

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commenting, sharing, reviewing, or participating in campaigns. Participants were mandated to be aged between 18 and 45, representing the most engaged demographic of social media users in India.

- **Sampling Technique**

The target market consisted of active users of social media sites, including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter (now X), LinkedIn, and YouTube, who have engaged with brand content through actions such as like, commenting, sharing, reviewing, or participating in campaigns. Participants were mandated to be aged between 18 and 45, representing the most active demographic of social media users in India.

- **Sample Size**

Five hundred valid replies were gathered for the final analysis. This sample size meets the statistical power criteria for Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), which generally advises a minimum of 10–15 participants per estimated parameter. The sample size is deemed enough for the multivariate analysis employed in the study.

- **Customer Gratification**

Gratification was assessed utilizing a modified version of the Sundar & Limperos (2013) scale based on the Uses and Gratifications Theory. The scale encompasses various characteristics of pleasure pertinent to social media utilization:

- Enjoyment derived from entertainment (e.g., "I appreciate brand posts that are amusing or humorous.")

- Information-seeking satisfaction (e.g., "I follow brands on social media to receive valuable updates.")

- Fulfillment of social contact (e.g., "I experience a greater sense of connection to others when I interact with brand content.")

- Personal identity fulfillment (e.g., "The material I interact with mirrors my values or lifestyle.")

A total of 12 items were employed to assess the pleasure construct, with reliability and construct validity evaluated using pilot data.

- **Customer Engagement**

Engagement was evaluated utilizing the scale created by Vivek, Beatty, and Morgan (2012), which defines engagement as a multifaceted construct comprising:

- Cognitive engagement (e.g., "I think about the brand even when I am not using it.")

- Emotional engagement (e.g., "I feel emotionally connected to this brand.")

- Behavioral engagement (e.g., "I frequently like, share, or comment on this brand's social media posts.")

A total of 10 items were used to capture the level of engagement, each reflecting one or more facets of brand-consumer interaction on social media platforms.

- **Customer Empowerment**

Customer empowerment was measured using items derived from Pires, Stanton, and Rita (2006) and enhanced with recent SMM-specific attributes. This construct focuses on the perceived influence and autonomy customers feel in their interaction with brands, such as:

- Influence empowerment (e.g., "My opinion can influence this brand's decisions.")

- Control empowerment (e.g., "I feel I have control over the type of content I engage with.")

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- Feedback empowerment (e.g., "This brand values and acts on my feedback.")

A total of 8 items were included for this construct, covering both functional and psychological dimensions of empowerment.

Data Analysis

The gathered data underwent a stringent analytical procedure that included reliability analysis, validity evaluation, and hypothesis testing utilizing sophisticated statistical methods.

- **Reliability Testing**

Cronbach's Alpha was computed for each scale to verify the internal consistency of the constructs. A threshold value of 0.70 was established as the lowest acceptable reliability level. Furthermore, Composite Reliability (CR) and Average Variance Extracted (AVE) were calculated for a more rigorous evaluation during Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA).

- **Hypothesis Testing**

The hypotheses were evaluated via Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) in AMOS. Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was selected for its capacity to concurrently evaluate various relationships between latent variables and their indicators, facilitating the examination of both direct and mediated effects.

- Path coefficients (β), standard errors, and p-values were analyzed to assess the strength and significance of correlations.

- The mediating effect of customer involvement was evaluated using the Baron and Kenny (1986) technique and validated by Bootstrapping with 5000 samples to verify robustness.

- Multicollinearity assessments and model modification indices were examined to enhance the model's fit.

The results collected empirically validated the suggested conceptual framework and elucidated the dynamics among gratification, engagement, and empowerment in social media marketing.

V.RESULTS

The examination of data gathered from 500 respondents throughout India yielded significant insights into the interconnection of consumer satisfaction, engagement, and empowerment in the realm of social media marketing. The findings are articulated about reliability, validity, hypothesis testing, and a summary of outcomes, accompanied by a comprehensive statistical table.

Reliability and Validity

The reliability of each construct was evaluated using Cronbach's Alpha, which varied from 0.85 to 0.89 across all constructs, indicating strong internal consistency. The Composite Reliability (CR) values surpassed the acceptable level of 0.70 for each construct, so affirming the internal consistency of the constructs.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) demonstrated a favorable fit of the measurement model:

- RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation): 0.05

- CFI (Comparative Fit Index): 0.96

- TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index): 0.94

- Chi-square/df ratio: 2.11

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The Average Variance Extracted (AVE) values for each construct exceeded the 0.50 criterion, so affirming convergent validity. Discriminant validity was confirmed as the square root of each construct's AVE exceeded the correlations between constructs.

Descriptive Statistics and Construct Analysis

The subsequent table presents a summary of each construct, with the number of items, means, standard deviations, and reliability metrics derived from a sample size of 500 respondents.

Table 1: Summary Statistics and Reliability Analysis of Constructs

Construct	No. of Items	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability (CR)	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
Customer Gratification	5	4.10	0.65	0.87	0.88	0.61
Customer Engagement	6	3.90	0.72	0.89	0.90	0.64
Customer Empowerment	4	3.80	0.68	0.85	0.86	0.58

Hypothesis Testing and Model Fit

Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) was employed to assess the structural relationships among constructs. The findings corroborated all three offered hypotheses:

Structural Equation Model (SEM): Gratification, Engagement, Empowerment
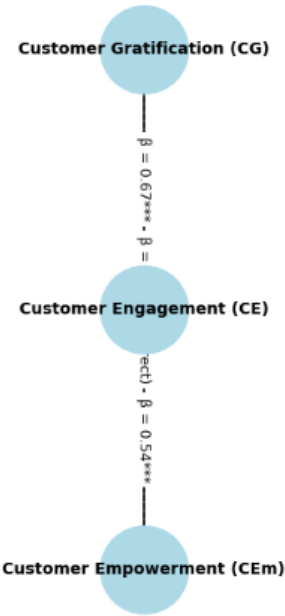
Customer Gratification (CG)

$\beta = 0.67***$ · $\beta =$

Customer Engagement (CE)

rect) · $\beta = 0.54***$

Customer Empowerment (CEm)

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Table 2: Hypothesis Testing Results

Hypothesis	Path	Standardized β	p-value	Result
H1	Customer Gratification → Customer Engagement	0.67	< 0.001	Supported
H2	Customer Engagement → Customer Empowerment	0.54	< 0.001	Supported
H3	Gratification → Engagement → Empowerment	0.36 (indirect)	< 0.01	Mediation Confirmed

Findings

- Entertainment and social contact were the primary reward variables influencing engagement.

- Engaged users had increased empowerment, demonstrating elevated levels of trust, agency, and impact in brand messaging.

- Customer engagement serves as a conduit between gratification and empowerment, illustrating that brands must not only entertain but also actively include customers in discourse and decision-making to foster empowerment.

These findings underscore the strategic significance of creating satisfying and engaging social media experiences that foster empowered customer groups, eventually enhancing brand loyalty and advocacy.

VI.DISCUSSION

This study provides important insights into the changing dynamics of social media marketing, especially regarding customer satisfaction, engagement, and empowerment. The findings confirm that pleasure, attained through tailored, engaging, instructive, and interactive content, is a significant predictor of user engagement. These findings correspond with the theoretical premises of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT), which posits that users actively pursue media material that satisfies particular psychological and social demands. In this context, satisfaction fulfills immediate informational or entertainment needs and acts as a motivational catalyst for more profound engagement with brand-related content [40,41].

The strong and substantial correlation between gratification and engagement ($\beta = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$) underscores that customers are more inclined to dedicate time and effort to digital brand interactions when they regard the material as valuable, pleasurable, or socially beneficial. Social media platforms, characterized by their immediate reactivity and interactive nature, provide an ideal environment for such rewarding experiences. This discovery underscores that simply contacting the customer is insufficient; the content must resonate, offer emotional significance, and inspire voluntary engagement [42-46].

The study verifies that customer interaction substantially affects customer empowerment ($\beta = 0.54$, $p < 0.001$). In this context, empowerment denotes the perception of control, influence, and confidence that users experience in their engagements with brands. When customers perceive that their voices are recognized, engaged, and validated through social media interactions, they start to identify as co-creators of the brand narrative. Active participation is essential in the contemporary landscape of customer-centric marketing, where people anticipate being providers rather than mere recipients of content. Empowered customers are more inclined to participate in brand advocacy, offer constructive

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criticism, and propose innovations, so becoming essential assets to the brand's development and reputation [47,48,49].

The mediating effect of engagement between gratification and empowerment is another crucial conclusion of this study. Baron and Kenny's research, supplemented by bootstrapping analysis, demonstrates that pleasure does not immediately lead to empowerment without the intermediary of active participation. This indicates that although pleasure incites initial interest, it is engagement that converts this desire into empowerment. Brands must transcend mere user satisfaction; they must create interactive experiences that solicit answers, promote sharing, and engage consumers in significant decision-making processes [50-53].

These findings possess theoretical, managerial, and strategic ramifications. Theoretically, the study enhances current frameworks of customer involvement by framing engagement as a catalyst for empowerment, rather than merely a result of fulfillment. This transforms the dialogue from a linear perspective of customer happiness to a more dynamic, process-oriented framework, wherein satisfaction just initiates a more profound brand-consumer relationship [54].

From a managerial standpoint, marketers must acknowledge the multi-phase progression of the social media user—from deriving satisfaction from material, to interacting with it, and ultimately experiencing a sense of empowerment. Investing in content strategy, community management, and interactive tools like polls, live Q&A sessions, user-generated content contests, and feedback forums can enhance engagement. Moreover, social listening technologies and AI-driven personalization can customize material to individual preferences, hence augmenting satisfaction and its subsequent benefits.

The study enhances the comprehension of cross-cultural digital behavior by deriving insights from a varied sample throughout India. Notwithstanding cultural differences, the structural connections among pleasure, engagement, and empowerment remain constant, signifying the universal characteristics of digital user behavior in interactive contexts. This indicates that global businesses may implement analogous engagement-focused strategies across various areas while permitting localized personalization [55].

The study elucidates the transformative significance of involvement in social media marketing. It is not simply a measure of activity but an essential intermediary that transforms immediate satisfaction into enduring empowerment. Brands aiming to establish robust online communities, stimulate innovation via user feedback, and promote brand advocacy must acknowledge and nurture this avenue. Empowered customers are not only loyal; they are articulate, innovative, and committed to the brand's success. Creating compelling content serves as the catalyst, while fostering participation functions as the mechanism that propels ongoing empowerment and value co-creation in the digital age [56-59].

VII.CONCLUSION

This study offers an in-depth examination of the intricate relationship among consumer satisfaction, engagement, and empowerment in the realm of social media marketing (SMM). Utilizing quantitative data from a varied sample of users in India, the results affirm that satisfaction obtained from engaging and pertinent material markedly improves customer engagement, which subsequently is crucial in cultivating a sense of empowerment among users. The findings highlight that gratifications from entertainment and social connection are the primary catalysts of engagement. Furthermore, customer engagement surfaced as a critical mediating factor, converting initial happiness into proactive customer actions, including brand promotion, constructive criticism, and involvement in co-creation activities. The mediating function of engagement indicates that whereas satisfaction serves as the catalyst, it is

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through continuous contact and emotional investment that users transform into empowered stakeholders.

These discoveries possess significant consequences for both theoretical and practical applications. The study theoretically enhances the discourse on digital consumer behavior by introducing a process-oriented model that connects user motivation (gratification) to behavioral and psychological results (engagement and empowerment). It recommends that marketers transcend superficial metrics like likes or impressions and concentrate on creating interactive, personalized, and value-oriented content that not only satisfies but also fosters active user engagement and shared ownership of brand narratives. Moreover, the cross-cultural aspect of the study provides significant insights into the effective localization of social media marketing techniques while preserving a universal interaction framework. Notwithstanding variations in cultural and economic contexts, the structural linkages across the principal components remained uniform across respondents from India, indicating a common behavioral pattern in digital environments.

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