Motivations, Media Dependency and Parasocial Interaction: Key Drivers of SNS Active Participation

Silvia Sanz-Blas*, Daniela Buzova, Victor Ballester-Riera, Paula Fierro-Rubio

Universitat de València, Valencia, Spain

***Corresponding author: Silvia Sanz-Blas**
Email: silvia.sanz@uv.es

ABSTRACT

Objective and Significance of the Study

This study aims to understand the psychological and social mechanisms that drive active participation on social networking sites (SNSs). By integrating the Uses and Gratifications Theory, Media Dependency Theory, and Parasocial Interaction Theory, it explores how user motivations, dependency on SNSs, and interactions with other users jointly influence engagement levels in digital platforms.

Methodology

An empirical study was conducted with a sample of 904 SNS users in Spain. The research model was tested using partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) to analyze the direct and mediating relationships among the key constructs.

Findings

The results show that user motivations are a strong predictor of SNS dependency, which in turn enhances parasocial interaction and active participation. In addition, users' motivations and parasocial interaction with other users significantly reinforce behavioral engagement. These findings confirm the multidimensional nature of SNS use, which is shaped not only by functional needs but also by emotional and social bonds.

Study Limitations

The generalizability of the results may be limited owing to the specific geographic context (Spain) and the cross-sectional design.

Practical Value of the Findings

The study offers a validated, theory-based framework that helps platform developers, marketers, and community managers understand the psychological drivers of user participation. The insights can support strategies aimed at fostering user engagement, enhancing content relevance, and strengthening loyalty through emotional and social connection.

1. Introduction

The use of social networking sites (SNS) represents one of the most transformative phenomena in the new media ecosystem, reshaping how individuals communicate, consume information, and build social connections (Appel et al., 2020). Recent research highlights both the ubiquity and social impact of these platforms, as they have become key spaces for self-expression, community building, and emotional exchange (Godard & Holtzman, 2024; Marciano et al., 2024). Studies also underline their growing influence across different population groups, from adolescents to older adults, emphasizing their role in shaping well-being and social participation (Bottaro et al., 2022; Siah et al., 2023).

The combination of mobile and social networks has changed the rules of the game when it comes to the consumption and use of media by individuals and the way they relate to products and brands. The trend is unstoppable, with individuals spending more and more time accessing the internet via mobile devices. In 2023, Spaniards spent on average 5 h and 42 min a day using the internet (Statista, 2024). In addition to this trend is the phenomenon of social discovery, which means that, in markets such as Spain, 86% of internet users are users of social networks: a total of 30.5 million people (Interactive Advertising Bureau [IAB] Spain, 2024). Of all the social networks, Facebook maintains leadership, followed by Instagram, X, TikTok, and WhatsApp. In terms of frequency

of use, WhatsApp, BeReal, and Instagram are used daily by more than 70% of Spaniards (IAB Spain, 2024).

The increase in the use of mobile devices in recent decades has driven the rise in social networking activity, as their mobility allows access to these platforms anytime, anywhere (Giunchiglia et al., 2018). Consequently, SNSs are understood to encompass three key attributes: (1) social network characteristics, (2) internet-based features, and (3) mobility aspects (Ha et al., 2015). It is clear that we are facing a new situation and that we have entered into a new way of communicating, relating, experiencing, and sharing, which opens up a world of opportunities for companies and brands. We are now hyper-connected, SNSs are fully integrated into our lives, and the advantages of their mobile versions align with the conditions of a more nomadic life that requires permanent connection to social networks to organize meeting up with friends, attend events, and maintain social relationships. SNSs also provide the usual social network perks, such as social interaction, entertainment, and information (Cambra et al., 2021; Castro-Higueras et al., 2024) and the ability to connect anytime, anywhere (Ha et al., 2015; Park, 2024; Sanz & Ruiz, 2013).

This paper aims to extend the research carried out to date on the use of social networking sites. In addition to furthering its conceptualization, the main objective of this study is to explain the relationships that emerge between users and social networks. This objective is based on three classic theories of the study of the relationship between individuals and the media: the Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G), Media Dependency Theory (MDT), and Parasocial Interaction Theory. All these theories came from the field of classical offline media studies, and throughout the current academic research, they have been developed and adapted in the online field, as well.

The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Bawack et al., 2023; Bhatiasevi, 2024; Cambra et al., 2021; Ha et al., 2015) tries to explain what motives and sought-after gratifications lead individuals to media use. Media Dependency Theory (Ji et al., 2022; Jung et al., 2012; Kim et al., 2015; Zheng et al., 2021) delves into the study of the functions that media fulfill given the user–media relationship. Parasocial interaction and participation effects (Catalina-García et al., 2022; Grant, 1996; Pretel-Jiménez et al., 2024) represent an extension of the previous theory and describe how a quasi-interpersonal relationship is achieved between the social media outlet and the individual or between the those using the social media outlet and the individual.

However, most prior research has analyzed these frameworks in isolation or in dual combinations, overlooking how they operate sequentially in shaping users' participation. This study addresses that gap by proposing a sequential integration of the three theories (motivations → dependency → parasocial interaction) to explain how cognitive needs trigger dependency relationships that subsequently evolve into emotional and relational bonds. This progression provides a more comprehensive and less fragmented understanding of SNS participation, capturing both the utilitarian and affective dimensions of user engagement. By articulating this linear path, the proposed research model advances theoretical integration and clarifies the mechanisms through which motivations transform into sustained, emotionally grounded participation.

The study contributes to the existing literature by offering an integrative theoretical model that explains active participation on social media from a multidimensional perspective. It also provides practical implications for brands and digital content managers, helping them to better understand the factors that drive audience engagement and loyalty. In this way, this work not only expands academic knowledge on SNS behavior but also provides a solid foundation for future research in the field of digital communication.

To achieve the proposed objectives, the paper is structured in two parts. The first part includes a review of the literature, the hypotheses (H), and the methodology. The second part examines the impact of various variables on SNS usage for communication through an empirical study using a sample of 904 social network users.

Literature Review

Motivations for Use and Social Networking Site (SNS) Dependency

The use of social networks and dependency on them can be explained from the perspective of two of the classic theories in the study of the media: the Uses and Gratifications Theory and the Media Dependency Theory. The Uses and Gratifications Theory (Perse, 1986; Rubin, 1983; 1984) assumes as its basic premise that the individual is using media to satisfy a set of needs that motivate the audience to actively seek gratification for their specific needs via that media's content. While the Uses and Gratifications Theory is focused on answering the question "what media do I use to satisfy my needs," the Media Dependency Theory allows us to answer the question "what objectives does the media allow me to fulfill?" According to this theory, there are six dimensions associated with the user–media relationship (Ball-Rokeach, 1989; Grant, 1989; Grant et al., 1991; Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998): self-understanding, social understanding, action orientation, interaction orientation, individual entertainment, and social entertainment. In the context of social networks, Media Dependency Theory allows us to understand how social media networks help us learn about ourselves and the world around us, get information to know how to behave, and relax and entertain ourselves when we are alone (Bowden-Green et al., 2021; Hu et al., 2022; Sheldon et al., 2021; Yang & Ha, 2021).

Therefore, when users recognize that a social media network can fulfill specific needs—such as staying informed, socializing, or seeking entertainment—they are more likely to develop a dependency on it (Cambra et al., 2021; Lin & Smahel, 2022; Rivas-Herrero & Igartua, 2021; Zadeh et al., 2023). In this sense, the motivations behind media use can trigger dependency, as users become increasingly reliant on their content to satisfy emerging needs and goals.

Cambra et al. (2021), for example, who focus on multiscreen news consumption among young Spaniards, conclude that, in terms of motivations for use, real-time information, comprehension of reality, social interaction, leisure, and habit have a direct and positive influence on multiscreen use. The study also highlights that real-time information seeking predicts multiscreen use behavior for news seeking, while social interaction and leisure play an important role in the duration of multiscreen use. In relation to internet media, the study by Jung et al. (2012) concludes that, in terms of motivations for use, communication, entertainment, expressing oneself/participation, and information seeking directly and positively influence dependency on these media. Chen (2021) also finds that, in terms of motivations for use, communicating, getting information, or keeping in touch when individuals are in public places directly and positively influence dependency on mobile media.

Accordingly, one of the major precursors of the dependency relationship is considered to be the uses and gratifications of media, as individuals can become aware of how their needs or goals are fulfilled through their motivations for use.

Previous studies on social networks have shown that the greater the motivation for use, the greater the dependency. For example, Ferris et al. (2021), in a study focusing on social network addiction in young adults, conclude that, as motivations, maintaining relationships, seeking virtual community, gaining status, finding entertainment, and passing time have a direct and positive influence on dependency on social networks. Men and Tsai (2013) also demonstrated that, in terms of motivations for use, information, entertainment, and social integration have a direct and positive relationship to dependency on media in the context of the Chinese social networks Renren and Weibo. Similarly, Ruiz et al. (2014), in a study focusing on fan pages, highlight that the motives for use and gratification that Facebook provides are important antecedents for the development of dependency on the social media outlet. Consequently, our working hypothesis is as follows:

H1. The higher the motivation for using SNSs, the greater the SNS dependency.

SNS Dependency and Parasocial Interaction

The term "parasocial interaction" was first coined in the 1950s by Horton and Wohl to explain the ability of mass media to create social and/or parasocial bonds and relationships with audiences. This parasocial relationship or interaction with the audience can be created by a certain affective reaction to the presenters, media personalities, commentators, and reporters who frequently appear on television (Horton & Wohl, 1956; Levy, 1979) or by the audience or their eventual participation by talking to the presenter (Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998).

The literature review shows a direct and positive relationship between media dependency and parasocial interaction, either with well-known or famous people or with other au-

dience members (Akhtar & Islam, 2023; Brotons-Gómez et al., 2023; Grant et al., 1991; Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1998; Su et al., 2021).

Nowadays, the parasocial nature of an interaction or relationship is not only restricted to the offline media but can also be extended to online media and, more specifically, to social media. Previous studies on social media (e.g., Akhtar & Islam, 2023; Hyman, 2021; Schramm et al., 2024; Steele, 2024) agree with their preceding authors that parasocial ties emerge when an individual has a more or less intense relationship of dependency with a certain social media outlet or network. In this study, parasocial interaction is understood as a one-sided psychological bond that a user develops with a media figure, occurring in the absence of reciprocal engagement. Thus, parasocial relationships refer to nonreciprocal socio-emotional connections established with media figures such as celebrities, content creators, or influencers (Hoffner, 2022; Liebers & Schramm, 2019; Stein et al., 2024). These relationships can be developed in the context of social media, where continuous exposure, interactivity, and perceived intimacy intensify users' feelings of familiarity, empathy, and trust toward the figures with whom they engage.

While parasocial interaction reflects a unilateral emotional or cognitive connection with media figures or other users, social network dependency refers to the extent to which individuals rely on social media to satisfy informational, social, or emotional needs (Andreassen, 2015; Ball-Rokeach & Defleur, 1976; Kuss et al., 2017). This dependency emerges when the use of social networks becomes essential for users' daily functioning or self-expression, often shaping their perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors (Akhtar & Islam, 2023; Ferris et al., 2021; Schramm et al., 2024). Unlike simple interaction, which involves voluntary and reciprocal engagement, dependency implies a stronger motivational drive and a perceived necessity to remain connected. In professional or academic contexts, such dependency can have mixed effects: While it facilitates networking, visibility, and knowledge sharing, excessive use may lead to distractions, reduced productivity, or blurred boundaries between personal and professional life (Chen et al., 2023; Gao & Shao, 2024; Zhang et al., 2023). This distinction is particularly relevant for understanding users' behavioral patterns on SNSs and their potential consequences for well-being and professional performance.

This parasocial relationship in new social media is not so much determined by the technical possibilities of the media outlet, as in more traditional media, but by the type of communication that takes place between the members of the social network—between users and public figures, brands, or organizations (Men & Tsai, 2013; Tsiotsou, 2015). There is now richer and broader interaction between users through the tools of each social media outlet: likes, direct messages, comments, shares, and tagging (Dewantara et al., 2023; Penttinen et al., 2022; Zhou et al., 2024).

Social media allow reciprocal one-to-one communication (typical of interpersonal communication), the option of one-to-many communication (typical of mass media), and many-

to-many communication (typical of networked communication) (Arroyo-Vázquez, 2018; Sanz-Blas et al., 2019; Tsiotsou, 2015). Therefore, this relationship extends not only to celebrities or public personalities, with whom the individual has no direct link, but also to other users who participate on these social media platforms and who are therefore on the same level as them (Sanz-Blas et al., 2019; Tsiotsou, 2015). Thus, if the user identifies with the people who actively participate on a social network, the parasocial effects are intensified.

It should be noted that this type of relationship, beyond that linked to a celebrity or well-known figure, had already begun to be identified in the study of traditional mass media, with Skumanich and Kintsfather (1998) analyzing, as part of parasocial relationships, the relationship between viewers and other members of the audience. Viewers, being able to share the comments and suggestions of other members of the audience, felt that they identified with other audience members and could even experience feelings of sympathy or even friendship toward them. Moreover, in many cases, this was a way of helping the viewer achieve their goals, and the advice given by these viewers was considered very useful (Skumanich & Kintsfather, 1993; 1998). In their research, Skumanich and Kintsfather (1998) used the concept of teleparticipation to refer to audience participation in television programs through, for example, telephone calls to the program to talk to the presenter. The present study develops the concept of SNS participation to refer to the participation of other users when they interact on social networks with the manager of a page or simply create content, news, events, photographs, etc.

In the online context, studies such as Ballantine and Martin's (2005) research on the Internet as a medium find a direct and positive relationship between the level of dependency on online communities and the parasocial relationships developed within it. Ballantine and Martin (2005) show how nonactive users develop parasocial relationships by viewing comments posted by other users in the community. More recent studies such as that of Sanz-Blas et al. (2019), focused on social networks, also show the importance of the relationship with other members who participate on social networks to achieve social goals. These results lead us to posit the following hypothesis:

H2. The greater the SNS dependency, the greater the effects of parasocial interaction via the participation of other members of the social network.

Active Participation on SNS

Previous studies have shown strong links between motivations for media use, media dependency, relationships with other media stakeholders (presenters and other audience members), and individual behavior (Men & Tsai, 2013; Sanz-Blas et al., 2019; Tsiotsou, 2015).

The Uses and Gratifications Theory has been applied to different mass media such as the press, radio, or television and, more recently, to digital media such as the Internet and social networks (Laor, 2022; Menon, 2024; Shin et al., 2021; Thong-

mak, 2021), proving that the more users are aware of their motivations, the more active they are in using the media outlet. For example, the study by Dolan et al. (2016) shows that, depending on the user's motivation for using a social network, their active participation on the social network varies significantly. Thus, users with an informative motivation tend mainly to consume content without generating high levels of interaction. Those motivated by entertainment participate more dynamically through commenting and sharing content. Users whose motivation lies in obtaining rewards or incentives tend not to have significant interactions or sustained engagement. Finally, users motivated by social interaction and a sense of belonging exhibit a high degree of participation in discussions, content creation, and digital community building. Along the same lines, the study by Pelletier et al. (2020) also identifies differences in the degree of user participation according to their motivation, also considering the platform used. Through a comparison between Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, the authors concluded that Twitter (now X) was mainly preferred for information searches, while social interaction was a motivation shared on both Twitter and Instagram. However, entertainment was the main driver for using Instagram, which in turn is the network where the highest user engagement was observed. In contrast, Facebook, despite being the largest platform and the one most used by businesses, had the lowest levels of usage intent and engagement.

More recent studies have delved deeper into the motivations that lead users, especially young people, to actively participate on social networks. Fernández-Rovira (2022) found that young Spaniards spend an average of 5.5 h a day on social networks, mainly motivated by the desire to share photos or videos and keep up with the activities of their contacts. This behavior suggests that the needs for social interaction and self-expression remain central to the use of these platforms. Moreover, a study by Leiva Soto et al. (2024) exploring the use of social networks through mobile devices analyzed young people's motivations for using their smartphones, finding that, in addition to traditional communication and entertainment needs, new motivations related to personalization and real-time interaction emerged. The work of Qin (2020) contributes to the Uses and Gratifications Theory by showing how the motives for using social networks influence interactions between brands and consumers, finding that information seeking and self-identity are the most influential motives for both consumption and contribution of content. Additionally, the authors conclude that content consumption on Facebook is associated with positive attitudes toward the brand page, attitudes that in turn increase purchase intent.

Zadeh et al. (2023) combines the Uses and Gratifications Theory with the Theory of Planned Behavior in their analysis of the social network Facebook, concluding that extrinsic motivations, such as information seeking and socialization, have a direct impact on the intention to co-create content, while intrinsic motivations, such as entertainment and social enhancement, influence indirectly via attitude. All of the above allows us to formulate the following hypothesis:

H3: The higher an individual's motivation to use SNSs, the greater the individual's active participation on SNSs.

According to research, once a relationship has been established between the individual and the media outlet or a figure/person on the media outlet, this relationship is likely to manifest itself in a certain behavior (exposure/viewing, purchasing, active participation, etc.) (Chen et al., 2021; Jen-Ruei & Chiung-Wen, 2023; Lee & Lee, 2022; Penttinen et al., 2022).

Previous research has shown that parasocial interaction is a determining motive or aspect for intention, attention, exposure, continuity of viewing, and affinity to the media outlet, identifying an important link between parasocial interaction and an individual's behavior (Hyman, 2021; Penttinen et al., 2022; Su et al., 2021; Tsiotsou, 2015; Zhou et al., 2024). Recent research in the field of online communities has revealed that dependency on a particular online community leads to increased parasocial interaction, which in turn precedes social behavior (online community use and content creation) (Ballantine & Martin, 2005). Thus, when users see material posted by other members online, they are motivated to make and post their own comments, thereby generating active participation and trust between users.

Tsiotsou (2015) describes the parasocial relationship on social networks as the interpersonal relationship between a user and the other members of a social network, which includes cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses. Thus, a study conducted on social networks shows how the development of parasocial relationships, through the participation of other users, is closely related to behavioral intentions. Consequently, users are more active on the social network, whether through commenting, expressing opinions, sharing experiences, or recommending activities, which translates into greater loyalty to the social network.
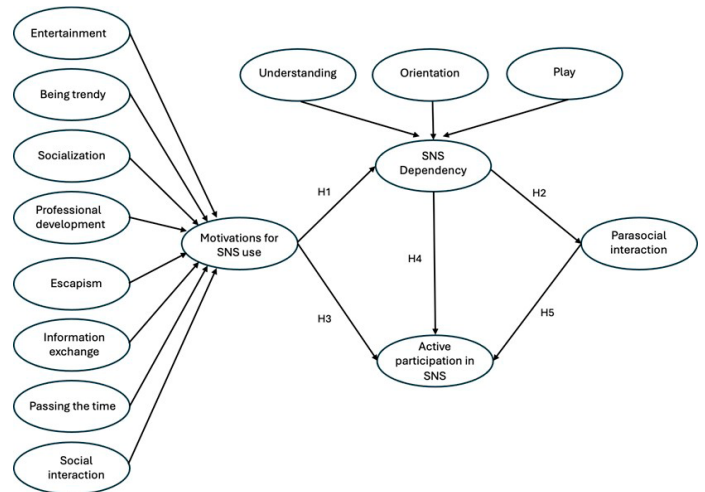
Similarly, given that the development of parasocial relationships is not instantaneous, a direct and positive relationship between dependency and behavior can be identified when the individual initially experiences low levels of parasocial interaction (Kim et al., 2015; Laor, 2022a; Marengo et al., 2021; Ognyanova & Ball-Rokeach, 2015; Uram & Skalski, 2022). Thus, we propose the following hypotheses:

H4: The greater an individual's SNS dependency, the greater the individual's active participation on SNSs.

H5: The more parasocial interaction an individual engages in via the participation of other members of the social network, the greater the individual's active participation on SNSs.

Based on the hypotheses set out above, we obtain the conceptual model of analysis depicted in Fig. 1.

Source: Authors' own creation.

Research Methodology

Research Design and Sampling

To respond to the research objectives and compare the proposed hypotheses, an empirical study was carried out by means of a personal survey with a structured questionnaire. Prior to this, a pre-test was carried out among SNS users, with the aim of improving the survey and avoiding possible errors of interpretation.

The questionnaire was structured in three parts: The first part asked respondents about their length of time as a user, frequency and time of use, and type of online friends; the second part asked about motivations for using social networks, individual–SNS relationships and other audience members, participation in SNS activities, and future behavioral intentions; and the last part of the questionnaire asked about users' sociodemographic aspects and their technological profile.

The sample selection procedure was nonprobabilistic. Sampling was carried out by quotas of gender and age based on data from the *Estudio anual de redes sociales* (IAB Spain, 2024). The fieldwork was carried out by a market research company, through online surveys distributed to a total of 935 panelists who were social network users. A filtering process was carried out to eliminate incomplete or inconsistent responses, applying the following criteria: response time well below the average; age of the respondent that did not coincide with the age at which that registered for the panel; and unfinished survey questions. Once the anomalous questionnaires had been eliminated following the aforementioned criteria, 904 valid questionnaires remained. Of the total sample, 51.5% were male and 48.5% female, with a predominant age range between 18 and 34 years (63.4%). Regarding the level of education and main occupation, a high percentage had a university education (44.5%) and were employed (44.2%).

Measurement Scales

For the measurement of usage motives, we used the scales of Quan-Haase and Young (2010), Smock et al. (2011), and Khan (2017). Regarding the variable media dependency, we used the scale developed by Grant (1996), adapted to the context of social networks. This scale measures the fulfillment of understanding, orientation, and entertainment goals, as well as a user's respective social and individual dimensions. The scale consists of 18 items, with 3 items representing each of the six dimensions. The effects of other users' participation on social networks were measured through a six-item scale, based on Sanz-Blas et al. (2017). Finally, the user's active participation on social networks was measured drawing on Kang et al. (2014), Khan (2017), and Vohra and Bhardwaj (2019). Appendix I provides a summary table including the definitions of the variables and their corresponding dimensions, which form the theoretical model of the study.

Data Analysis

The present study used the partial least squares path modeling (PLS-PM) technique for the estimation of both the measurement model and the structural model. The software used was SmartPLS 4.1.0.9. The main reasons for using PLS-PM were twofold: The first is because PLS-PM is more appropriate when the model contains formative indicators, and the second is due to its predictive nature.

The estimation process was carried out in two steps (Hair et al., 2021). First, the measurement model was estimated, through which the relationship between the indicators and the latent construct was determined. Second, an estimation of the structural model was performed, through which the relationships between the constructs were assessed.

Results

Measurement Model

The analysis of the measurement model was carried out in terms of reliability and validity. As there are reflective and formative measures, it was necessary to establish a distinction between the two types, as the estimation and validation procedures are different. For the reflective measures, reliability was examined (Cronbach, 1951) through internal consistency and convergent and discriminant validity (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Gefen & Straub, 2005).

The values obtained in the study (Table 1) had high internal consistency in all the reflective constructs analyzed, as all reliability measures exceeded the recommended levels: Cronbach's alpha index values exceeded the 0.7 threshold (Churchill, 1979; Nunnaly & Bernstein, 1994), and the composite reliability index values were also above 0.7 (Nunnaly, 1978). Furthermore, the existence of convergent validity could be affirmed for all the reflective constructs analyzed, as the average variance extracted (AVE) reached a value above 0.5 (Fornell & Larcker, 1981; Bagozzi & Yi, 1988), indicating that the variance shared between the construct and its measures was greater than that shared with the error. The factor loadings

of the variables measured on their respective constructs exceeded the minimum considered value of 0.6 (Bagozzi & Yi, 1988), all of them being significant.

Table 1. Evaluation of the measurement model.

Construct/dimension and indicator	VIF	Weight	Loading	t-Value	Cronbach's α	Reliability composed	AVE
Motivation (second order)					n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Entertainment	1.45	0.257			0.756	0.843	0.574
Ent1			0.743	32.226			
Ent2			0.722	31.030			
Ent3			0.793	56.777			
Ent4			0.771	53.435			
Being trendy	1.80	0.158			0.879	0.912	0.675
Tre1			0.729	41.692			
Tre2			0.840	61.362			
Tre3			0.827	67.405			
Tre4			0.839	67.575			
Tre5			0.867	84.765			
Socialization	1.44	0.109			0.892	0.933	0.822
Soc1			0.896	102.636			
Soc2			0.902	102.659			
Soc3			0.923	123.956			
Professional development	1.83	0.116			0.819	0.892	0.734
Prd1			0.884	96.048			
Prd2			0.868	78.020			
Prd3			0.815	48.842			
Escapism	1.52	0.241			0.847	0.908	0.766
Esc1			0.838	73.029			
Esc2			0.886	107.684			
Esc3			0.901	113.034			
Information exchange	1.73	0.277			0.814	0.867	0.568
Infe1			0.718	30.470			
Infe2			0.801	42.419			
Infe3			0.769	33.666			
Infe4			0.797	58.968			
Infe5			0.796	46.953			
Passing the time	1.65	0.102			0.813	0.870	0.571
Past1			0.701	33.752			
Past2			0.763	53.893			
Past3			0.761	44.119			

Construct/Item	VIF	Weight	Loading	t	CR	CR2	AVE
Past4			0.769	44.127			
Past5			0.787	53.515			
Social interaction	1.72	0.337			0.712	0.792	0.516
Sint1			0.708	16.248			
Sint2			0.702	16.261			
Sint3			0.769	23.829			
Dependency (second order)					n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Understanding	1.93	0.313			0.820	0.870	0.528
Un1			0.717	32.429			
Un2			0.755	47.642			
Un3			0.728	42.005			
Esc1			0.614	22.370			
Esc2			0.752	37.599			
Esc3			0.784	50.508			
Orientation	1.84	0.457			0.822	0.871	0.529
Ora1			0.676	31.691			
Ora2			0.724	39.372			
Ora3			0.726	37.448			
Ori1			0.721	30.337			
Ori2			0.720	36.917			
Ori3			0.792	55.234			
Play	1.77	0.373			0.845	0.885	0.564
Pla1			0.786	47.521			
Pla2			0.789	44.327			
Pla3			0.664	34.886			
Ply1			0.799	68.192			
Ply2			0.778	38.530			
Ply3			0.731	30.278			
Parasocial interaction (reflective)					0.846	0.886	0.565
Parin1			0.723	41.976			
Parin2			0.763	50.301			
Parin3			0.782	46.820			
Parin4			0.752	42.745			
Parin5			0.733	41.499			
Parin6			0.756	42.356			
Active participation (reflective)					0.884	0.905	0.510
Apart2			0.728	38.233			
Apart3			0.720	40.716			
Apart4			0.606	21.535			
Apart5			0.670	29.348			
Apart6			0.791	53.399			
Apart7			0.705	37.441			
Apart9			0.640	27.360			
Apart10			0.791	53.399			
Apart11			0.681	36.289			
Apart12			0.647	31.017			

Ent, entertainment; Tre, being trendy; Soc, socialization; Prd, professional development; Esc, escapism; Infe, information exchange; Past, passing the time; Sint, social interaction; Un, understanding; Ora, action orientation; Ori, interaction orientation; Pla, play; Parin, parasocial interaction; Apart, active participation; n.a., not applicable
Source: Authors' own creation.

In addition, the values obtained from the study data, as shown in Table 2, allow us to affirm that the discriminant validity offers satisfactory values. The variance shared between the construct and its own measures (AVE) was higher than that shared with other constructs. In other words, the values on the main diagonal were higher than the values outside it.

Table 2. Measuring instrument: discriminant validity.

	Motivation for use	SNS dependency	Parasocial interaction	Active participation
Motivation for use	n.a.			
SNS dependency	0.7101	n.a.		
Parasocial interaction	0.6027	0.6934	0.753	
Active participation	0.6429	0.6805	0.6523	0.714

Note: The diagonal elements in bold correspond to the values of the squared variance extracted from each construct. Below the diagonal are the correlations between constructs. All correlations are significant for $p < 0.05$. n.a: not applicable.
Source: Authors' own creation.

To determine the reliability and validity of the formative indicators in the present study, the scheme developed by Petter et al. (2007) was taken into account, which establishes, on the one hand, the analysis of collinearity between the components and, on the other, the analysis of the weights of the items on their corresponding formative constructs and their respective significance (Chin, 1998; Gefen et al., 2000). As can be seen in Table 3, the variance inflation factor (VIF) values obtained were lower than the established minimum value of 3.3 (Diamantopoulos & Siguaw, 2006), which indicates the absence of multicollinearity. The significance of the weights of the indicators was established by the *t*-statistic, using the bootstrapping technique (Chin, 1998). The results obtained (Table 3) confirm that the formative constructs that make up the eight dimensions of the motives for using social networks have a positive and significant effect on the overall motivation to use them. Similarly, the formative constructs that make up the three dimensions of dependency have a positive and significant effect on overall SNS dependency.

The analysis of motivations for use (Table 3) reveals that social interaction and information exchange stand out as the main reasons for using social networks, reflecting their central role in social communication and information seeking. When analyzing media outlet dependency, it is observed that orientation and entertainment are the most influential fac-

tors, showing that dependency is linked to the need for social guidance and recreational content. The greater impact of these variables can be explained by the interactive design of social networks, which promotes social connectivity and the constant updating of information, as well as their ability to offer attractive and personalized content.

Table 3. Analysis of collinearity, weights, and t-values.

Construct and Dimension	VIF	Weights	t-Values
Motivation for SNS use			
Entertainment	1.495	0.257	7.830
Being trendy	1.800	0.158	4.545
Socialization	1.439	0.109	2.843
Professional development	1.831	0.116	3.929
Escapism	1.521	0.241	5.963
Information exchange	1.733	0.277	8.291
Passing the time	1.645	0.102	2.721
Social interaction	1.722	0.337	11.266
SNS dependency			
Understanding	1.931	0.313	7.708
Orientation	1.842	0.457	11.782
Entertainment	1.776	0.373	8.720

Source: Authors' own creation.

Structural Model

Table 4 presents the values of the standardized coefficients of the structural relationships and the respective significance levels of their associated *t*-statistic. The significance analysis indicates the existence of stable relationships in all the structural relationships established since the value of the *t*-statistic was significant in all cases, at 99%.

Table 4 also shows the predictive ability of the structural model. In this study, the R^2 values of all factors far exceeded the minimum value recommended by Falk and Miller (1992), evidencing the adequate predictive ability of the model. Also, Table 4 includes the Q^2 statistic, which represents a measure of how well the observed values are reconstructed by the estimated parameters (Wold, 1982; Fornell & Cha, 1994). In all cases the values were positive, showing that the model possesses predictive ability in estimating the values.

Table 4. Results of the structural model.

Hypothesis	Path coefficient (β)	t-Value (boot-strap)	R^2	Q^2
H1: Motivation for use → SNS dependency	0.746*	47.676		
H2: SNS dependency → parasocial interaction	0.694*	40.999		
H3: Motivation for use → active participation	0.379*	12.184		
H4: SNS dependency → active participation	0.231*	6.593		
H5: Parasocial interaction → active participation	0.246*	7.506		
Construct				
Parasocial interaction			0.481	0.256
Active participation			0.528	0.265

* < 0.05

Source: Authors' own creation.

The results of the structural model indicate the fulfillment of all the hypotheses, showing direct and significant relationships between the variables of motivation for use, SNS dependency, parasocial interaction, and active participation. The highest coefficient corresponded to the relationship between motivation for use and SNS dependency (β = 0.746; *p* < 0.01), indicating that the needs and gratifications sought on social networks are the main driver of dependency. This result is in line with the Uses and Gratifications Theory, as users turn to SNSs in search of social interaction, entertainment, and information, reinforcing a habit of continuous use.

The dependency, in turn, had a significant impact on the development of parasocial interactions (β = 0.694; *p* < 0.01). This occurs because frequent and prolonged use of social networks favors familiarity with and closeness to influencers or other social network participants, fostering quasi-interpersonal relationships. The constant and interactive nature of social network content intensifies these emotional ties, explaining the observed high impact on the relationship between dependency and parasocial interaction.

In terms of active participation, initial motivations (β = 0.379; *p* < 0.01) and dependency (β = 0.231; *p* < 0.01) and parasocial interaction (β = 0.246; *p* < 0.01) had a positive influence, although with different degrees of impact. Motivations for use drive active participation by satisfying social and information needs, while dependency generates active participation derived from the fulfillment of personal and social orientation and entertainment goals. Parasocial interactions, meanwhile, encourage more emotional and engaged active participation, as users seek to connect with and support others who participate on social networks and with whom they have established an emotional bond.

Discussion

The results confirm the fulfillment of all the hypotheses proposed in the structural model, reinforcing the theoretical linkages among motivations for SNS use motivations, dependency, parasocial interaction, and active participation. These findings provide empirical support for the integration of the Uses and Gratifications Theory (U&G), the Media Dependency Theory (MDT), and Parasocial Interaction Theory in the analysis of social media behavior.

The strong, positive relationship between motivations for use and SNS dependency indicates that users' psychological

needs for information, entertainment, and social connection are key drivers of dependency. This result supports previous studies showing that the gratifications sought on SNSs promote more frequent and habitual use (Critikián & Núñez, 2021; López de Ayala López et al., 2022). When users perceive that their social and informational needs are effectively satisfied, SNSs become a recurrent space of interaction and self-expression.

The significant effect of dependency on parasocial interaction highlights the emotional dimension of media dependency. Prolonged social media use and familiarity with other users or content creators foster a sense of closeness to and identification with them, leading to stable parasocial relationships (Akhtar & Islam, 2023; Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2025; Schramm et al., 2024; Shin et al., 2024). These findings confirm that SNS dependency not only reflects behavioral engagement but also strengthens affective and symbolic bonds between users and online communities.

Regarding active participation, the positive effects of motivations, dependency, and parasocial interaction reveal the multidimensional nature of users' engagement. Motivations encourage participation by satisfying social and informational needs, while dependency generates participation linked to personal and entertainment gratifications (Claro Montes et al., 2024; Zadeh et al., 2023). Parasocial interaction, in turn, drives a more emotional and relational form of participation, encouraging users to share content and express opinions within communities of trust (Paniagua-Iglesias et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024).

Taken together, these results validate the integrative framework proposed in this study and contribute to explaining how cognitive, emotional, and social factors jointly determine user behavior on SNSs. The combined influence of motivations, dependency, and parasocial interaction offers a comprehensive view of how social media participation evolves from basic gratifications to deeper forms of emotional engagement and commitment.

Therefore, as shown in previous studies developed in the field of online communities (Cristancho Triana & Cancino Gómez, 2023; Critikián & Núñez, 2021), users develop relationships with social networking sites to achieve their goals, and the intensity of this relationship determines their level of use and active participation in communication.

Conclusions

This study contributes to understanding the psychological and social mechanisms that explain users' active participation on social networking sites. By integrating the Uses and Gratifications Theory, Media Dependency Theory, and Parasocial Interaction Theory into a single conceptual model, it provides a multidimensional perspective that links motivations, dependency, and parasocial relationships as antecedents of active participation.

The results demonstrate that motivations for SNS use foster dependency, which in turn promotes parasocial relationships and increases active participation. These interconnections confirm that participation on social networks is not only a result of technological accessibility but also a process grounded in psychological gratifications and social interaction. The study thus extends the scope of U&G and MDT by showing that gratifications evolve into emotional dependencies that sustain long-term engagement.

From a theoretical point of view, this research advances understanding of the affective and relational dimensions of social media use. The inclusion of parasocial interaction enriches the explanatory power of existing frameworks by revealing how emotional connections and symbolic identification contribute to sustained participation on SNSs. Moreover, by empirically testing the joint influence of motivations, dependency, and parasocial interaction, the study offers a validated model that can serve as a reference for future research on social media behavior.

Finally, the findings also provide insights relevant to digital communication and marketing strategies. Recognizing that users' engagement stems from both cognitive and emotional gratifications helps explain why participation on SNSs has become a key element in brand–consumer relationships and online communities. Understanding these dynamics can help organizations design content and interactions that foster authentic, lasting connections with users.

Management Implications

The study offers practical implications for brands and digital content managers, highlighting the importance of designing strategies that meet users' social, informational, and emotional needs to foster sustained engagement. The implications are also relevant for companies that want to establish ongoing relationships with consumers through social media.

First, it is clear that companies are facing a new situation where new media enable companies to communicate with and relate to their consumers in a new way (Celis et al., 2020; Rodríguez Herráez et al., 2017). As this research has shown, since social interaction is one of the main reasons why users access social networks (López de Ayala López et al., 2022; Papacharissi & Mendelson, 2011; Serrano-Puche, 2013), companies should enhance the conversation with their fans and encourage their active participation (Claro Montes et al., 2024; Kang et al., 2014; Zuccherino, 2021). It is important that companies not only create content but also listen to consumers by, for example, asking for their opinion on how to improve a product or service and asking them to participate in voting and even in the development of the message of a communication campaign.

Second, companies should maximize the capacity of social networks as an information platform (Rodríguez & Chapis Cabrera, 2019; Sampedro Guamán et al., 2021). In their branded content strategies, companies should talk about, in addition to their products and services, topics of interest to con-

sumers related to the brand's sector, such as fashion, health, sport, etc. In short, consumers should consider this information relevant to share with other members of the community or even improve it through their comments and suggestions.

Third, companies must make their websites attractive and entertaining. This entertainment requirement can be satisfied by using quality graphic and audiovisual content (Paniagua-Iglesias et al., 2024). The immediacy of content creation should not affect the quality of the content. In addition, images must be adapted to display on a mobile device.

Fourth, companies should facilitate interaction among users themselves (SNS participation) (Gálvez-Rodríguez et al., 2025; Shin et al., 2024; Yang et al., 2024) by encouraging discussion or interaction between them, for example, by creating online and offline events and encouraging participation in debates or on forums on topics related, once again, to the brand's sector.

Finally, it is important that, when developing promotional or advertising strategies on SNSs, companies are aware that brands are no longer just displayed but also shared. Business communication is now about conversations. Encouraging that conversation will increase the likelihood that a business's customers will engage and interact with that business's products or services. As such, companies should be approachable and human to connect with the new consumer.

Limitations

The conclusions obtained also pose a series of limitations and open up new lines of research, the study of which is of interest in the future.

First, it should be noted that the study focuses on general user participation on social networks. Therefore, it is recommended to test the model on specific platforms, such as Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, or Instagram, and compare the results among them.

Second, the use of a nonprobability quota sampling method represents another limitation. Although this is a common and valid procedure in social media studies, the results should not be overgeneralized to the entire Spanish population, but rather generalized only to SNS users with similar sociodemographic and behavioral characteristics.

Another limitation lies in the evolving nature of the online environment. Given the rapid changes in digital platforms and user habits, the conclusions drawn from this research may lose validity over time. Therefore, it is recommended to periodically replicate the study to assess the robustness and temporal consistency of the findings.

In addition, the data were obtained through self-reported measures, which might be subject to response bias or social desirability effects. Future studies could complement subjective evaluations with behavioral or observational data to validate the results.

Finally, the cross-sectional design limits the possibility of establishing causal relationships between the analyzed variables. A longitudinal or experimental design would allow for a better understanding of how motivations, dependency, and parasocial interaction evolve over time and influence user behavior dynamically.

Future Research Directions

Future research could explore the moderating role of users' technological profiles, as this factor may influence the relationship between motivations, dependency, and parasocial interaction when it comes to determining active participation. It would also be relevant to analyze demographic moderators, such as age or type of social media platform, to identify whether these variables condition the strength or direction of the proposed relationships.

It would also be valuable to investigate other psychological or social factors that may shape users' engagement with social networking sites, such as media affinity, involvement, or perceived authenticity, which can provide a more nuanced understanding of online participation behavior.

Future studies could also apply mixed or multimethod approaches, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to capture the complexity of users' motivations and interactions on SNSs. Moreover, cross-cultural or longitudinal studies could offer comparative insights into how cultural and contextual variables affect the relationships proposed in the model, as well as how these relationships evolve over time.

In addition, future research could focus on the quality and emotional depth of the parasocial bond, rather than merely its presence or absence, examining how perceived closeness, trust, or authenticity shape users' sustained engagement. Exploring these aspects could further refine the theoretical understanding of parasocial relationships and their role in digital communication.

Finally, examining the role of emerging technologies (e.g., virtual influencers, artificial intelligence [AI]-driven recommendation systems, or metaverse-based environments) could extend the theoretical framework of this study, offering a contemporary view of media dependency and parasocial relationships in digital contexts.

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Appendices

Appendix I.

Definition of constructs and dimensions.

Construct/dimension	Definition	Key references
Motivation	Refers to the underlying reasons that drive individuals to use social networking sites (SNSs) to satisfy cognitive, social, and emotional needs	Quan-Haase & Young (2010); Smock et al. (2011); Khan (2017)
Entertainment	Use of SNSs for enjoyment, relaxation, or diversion	
Being trendy	The motivation to stay up to date with trends and popular content shared across social networks	
Socialization	Engaging with others to maintain relationships and develop new social ties through SNSs	
Professional development	Use of SNSs to build professional visibility, share expertise, and expand career opportunities	
Escapism	Use of SNSs to escape from daily routines, boredom, or stress through online interaction and distraction	
Information exchange	Motivation to obtain, share, and discuss information or opinions with others within SNS communities	
Passing the time	Use of SNSs as a pastime activity or to occupy idle moments without a specific goal	
Social interaction	Engagement in online communication and collaboration with others, such as commenting, sharing, and participating in group activities	
Dependency	Represents the degree to which users rely on SNSs to satisfy informational, orientational, and entertainment goals	Ball-Rokeach (1989); Grant (1996); Skumanich & Kintsfather (1998)
Understanding	Dimension of dependency referring to using SNSs to interpret and make sense of oneself and the surrounding world	
Orientation	Dependency dimension reflecting the use of SNSs as a guide for action or social behavior, providing cues for decision-making	
Play	Dependency dimension referring to using SNSs for amusement and relaxation in both individual and social contexts	
Parasocial interaction	A one-sided psychological bond that users form with media figures or other social media participants, characterized by feelings of intimacy and friendship in the absence of reciprocal communication	Hoffner (2022); Liebers & Schramm (2019); Stein et al. (2024)
Active participation	Extent to which users engage proactively in SNS activities by creating, commenting, sharing, and co-creating content with others	Kang et al. (2014); Khan (2017); Vohra & Bhardwaj (2019)