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Article

An Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis of Digital Media Gratifications: Re-Examining Uses and Gratifications Theory in the Contemporary Media Environment (2015-2025)

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Abstract

We present a qualitative re-examination of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) within the current and evolving digital media landscape through the timeframe of (2015-2025). UGT has long guided scholars and researchers in understanding what audience motivations entail while we find that the initial assumptions face an onslaught of challenges in the current age of curated algorithmic media, swirling interactivity, and converged platforms. Accessibility to growing and ever-changing social and mobile media requires an emergent deeper understanding into the ways that users are seeking and obtaining gratification in ways that will traverse past the previous understanding of the theory and considerations. This study aims to address a gap in contemporary UGT literature by shifting from a quantitative analysis of survey data on audience gratifications to a qualitative exploration of individuals lived experiences with media consumption. Using an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design, we define lived experience through in-depth semi-structured interviews and media diaries that capture rich, contextualized narratives from digital media users. Ultimately, the qualitative approach provides us the ability to dig deep into the agency of the user and media environmental structures, whereby both began to feel paradoxical (Ullah, 2025). Findings of the study reveal expectations of also emergent gratifications related to curated-self-expression, algorithmically defined connections and relate through various seamless transports between information consumption and meaningful escapism. The analysis points to the knowledge that gratifications are still definitive for the users and specific to the platform consumed. The relationship between active audiences and the shaping, powerful space of the digital ecosystem warrants an inclusive perspective of a robust and current UGT. Through a new way of knowing, in including a media ecology perspective, we present a new/internal UGT lens with salient components of meaning-making and sustainability in a dialectical relationship with digital media. The implications of this study present a greater opportunity for scholars to develop thoughtful and robust UGT framework and suggests that the study be of critical interest to platform designers. The study also holds importance for media literacy and how digital media literacy is developed, implemented in practice, and researched.

Keywords: uses and gratifications theory (UGT); digital media; interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA); qualitative research; media ecology; social media; audience studies; algorithmic curation; media consumption

1. Introduction

The modern media landscape distinguishes itself from the era of broadcast with the unprecedented levels of interactivity, personalization, and convergence. Many of the foundational theories in communication were conceived in the world of broadcast media, where many familiar frameworks are in the process of disruption due to digital platforms. Social media, streaming services, and immersive virtual environments, among other digital contexts, have shifted how people

select and engage with media content. This shift has altered communication practices, while also creating complexity with the motivations and satisfactions connected to content engagement. Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) is a body of research designed primarily to understand the unique user-centric encounter with media. Fundamental to UGT is the assumption of an audience who is active in their decision to use media for needs and desires.

Developed in the mid-20th century to account for the audience's choice of media in radio, television and print, UGT has utilized its values across macro trends in media use. The basic structure of UGT—that media users are activated, goal-oriented and aware of their own needs—has been useful in describing the reasons for usage across media platforms, including websites, blogs, social networking sites, and apps (Wibowo, 2022). In the digital context, UGT is still relevant and makes it possible to explore more varied phenomena, with research looking at why users select one social media platform over another, what drives sharing of content, or, in much broader senses, the satisfaction that individuals derive from their interactions online (Du, 2024). The theory outlines how media users approach interactions with an emphasis on motivation for consumptive properties in digital environments. UGT has been used to examine motivations for TikTok consumption from entertainment to social connection to news and informative sources (Ahmed, 2025). Not solely focused on social media, UGT allows for explanations of perceptions of influencers, whether they were a social media user or the influencer researching their motivations anytime they explain their reasons for producing marketable content. Influencer consumption illustrates how influencer and user (the consumer), cognition on their own validations, motivations, and participatory process; and offers unique potential in other actors in the media ecosystem (Chu, 2025).

Although UGT continues in its relevance, the operational facets of contemporary media include algorithmic curation, interactive spaces for distribution and production, and a clear interdependency for consumers to see themselves as active content producers—complicate the role users have in the application of the UGT framework. The notion of an audience that is fully sovereign and aware becomes increasingly complicated when we consider the many influence structures presented to an individual based on their choices for engagement. Broadly, UGT has been successful in identifying what gratifications are sought after by users, while we are left in the UGT framework without an explanation of the complexities, subjectivity, and often contradictions of users lived experiences in their media engagements. Similarly, the UGT framework appears challenged with the growth of problem internet use, digital addictions, and other negative consequences of content consumption in a normative functionalist perspective of gratifying use of media (Wei, 2024).

Scholarly reviews of the UGT tradition have highlighted a critical gap in existing literature; many articles use UGT for descriptive, but not theoretical, or methodological, advancement within the complexities of the contemporary media landscape (Mateus, 2023). Certainly, there is a need to move beyond listing gratifications, but to find depth in the phenomenological reality of the user experiences and interpretation of their media choices in these emerging digital contexts. The UGT framework has significant potential; however, its experiential use of the UGT theory has revealed limitations that warrant continued acknowledgement of its potential, especially relating to the aspects of excessive engagement and/or negative consequences (Sun, 2020).

This study responds to the need for a more nuanced and contextually grounded approach to UGT. It uses an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA) to examine the lived experiences of digital media users from 2015-2025. When social media platforms matured, the platform economy was born, and digital technologies became normalized in everyday life. By focusing on the subjective meaning making of users, it intends to lay bare the nuanced, emergent, and sometimes very personal gratifications that current media use entails. This is done not to disregard UGT, but to review, deepen, and expand its theoretical relevance, and in turn provide a better sense of the dialectical relationship between human needs and the media landscape characterized by interwoven changes. This qualitative study will help elucidate how users respond to the tensions between agency and structure, and how they seek off the peace factors of gratification in a digital world that users inhabit instead of consuming.

2. Research Problem, Objectives, and Significance

2.1. Research Problem

This study addresses the tensions and growing disjuncture between the classical concepts of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) and the current milieu of a convoluted media landscape. UGT has been a bedrock for decades on audience behaviors with an assumption that audience members are active agents choosing consciously to use media to fulfill psychological and social needs. It has been applied to digital and social media, where abundance of studies validated the application - discovering motivations for using platforms, sharing content, and interacting with others online (Du, 2024; Wibowo, 2022).

The media ecosystem that is incredibly algorithmically structured and highly interactive is incompatible with core assumptions of UGT. Additionally, user generated content is not limited to just responding to needs but also shaping needs using media forms. This ambiguity incites three areas of investigation for this research problem:

1. **The Assumption of an Active & Conscious Audiences:** Traditional UGT models a highly agentic user, which means the user is aware of their needs, choosing to seek out and use media that fulfills that need. The UGT conceptualization of an active agentic audience complicates issues of fulfillment if a digital world is constructed so subtly (recommendation algorithms, platform architecture) that users' needs and/or desires are shaped organically. The lines drawn between active seeking and passive consumption are nebulous. Given that users are intentionally seeking gratifications, there is more comprehensive investigation into whether gratifications are actively pursued, incidentally obtained from using structured media.
2. **The Nature of "Gratifications" in a Converged Media Environment:** Early UGT identified gratifications as information, entertainment, social integration, escapism, etc., all of which may be accurate descriptors, but more accurately describe a complex of and emergent satisfactions resulting from digital media. The fulfillment of gratification today can be described by curation of self-presentation, online identity management to maintain parasocial relationships with influencers, and gratifications of contribution to online community. UGT has operationalized gratifications by only looking at the positive or functional outcomes, often neglecting the "darker" aspects of gratifications that can also have negative consequences (digital addiction, misinformation exposure, social comparison anxiety) (Wei, 2024). This highlights a serious gap in empirical research regarding accounts of fulfilling multifaceted and contradictory gratifications the end-user receives, or acknowledgement of the empirical data.
3. **Methodological & Theoretical Stagnation:** Although still frequently applied in the literature, a significant amount of research using UGT has been deemed methodologically conservative by some. Much research has utilized quantitative surveys that measure predetermined gratifications; some studies "simply mention the Uses and Gratifications Theory in passing and do not offer a conceptual or methodological contribution that could investigate the boundaries of the UGT" (Mateus, 2023). Therefore, the field is stagnant as the framework is utilized, but theorization or critical examination is overlooked while the environment shifts in fundamental ways. Theoretical development requires qualitative and interpretive approaches so more can be uncovered in terms of the subjective meanings associated with and lived experiences in media consumption, particularly with new media, as theorization advances. Literature recognizes these boundaries, and the future research possibilities these boundaries hold especially with respect to problematic or excessive use of new media (Sun, 2020).

Thus, the research problem continues to be that the applications of UGT have limitations that cannot adequately consider the subjective, context-dependent, and technologically-mediated aspect of gratification seeking in the digital age of 2015–2025. Whereby a conceptual and methodological gap exists in understanding how the users experience and make sense of their media use, therefore this study will attempt to fill those gaps using qualitative inquiry.

2.2. Research Objectives

To help address the above research problem statement, this study has the following primary and secondary objectives.

Primary Objective:

- To conduct an in-depth interpretive phenomenological study of the lived experience of individuals that use digital media, with the aim of critically reflecting on and extending the empirical applicability of Uses and Gratifications Theory in the current media ecology environment (2015-2025).

Secondary Objectives:

1. To identify and describe the primary gratifications that individuals sought and obtained from a range of digital media platforms including social media & streaming services and interactive applications.
2. To investigate the subjective meanings attributed to media choices and consumption patterns, including the language users used to describe their needs, motivations and the resulting gratifications and/or dissatisfactions.
3. To investigate the user agency and platform structure relationship, and how users experience and navigate algorithmic curation, personalization, and interactive affordances in pursuit of gratification.
4. To explore gratifications beyond typology, or platform-specific meanings pertaining to identity construction, community participation, and creative self-expression.
5. To contribute rich qualitative evidence that provides an understanding of negative or problematic outcomes of gratification-seeking behaviors in the digital age (e.g., dependency, anxiety, information overload).
6. To put forth a revised conceptual framework for thinking about media consumption that combines the insights of Media Ecology Theory and UGT, and human psychology, thereby creating a more holistic model for understanding the issues in media use.

2.3. Research Questions

Following from the research objectives, this study will situate itself with the following central and subsidiary research questions:

Central Research Question:

- How do individual users describe the gratifications sought and obtained from personal experience with digital media interaction in the contemporary (2015-2025) context?

Subsidiary Research Questions:

1. What dominant themes or patterns characterize the lived experience of fulfillment through digital media use?
2. How do users articulate the relationship between their own intentions and the resulting effect of the platform features (e.g., algorithms, notifications, interactive features etc.) on their consumption?
3. How do users describe the role of digital media in their identity formation, social connection, and emotional regulation?
4. What specific or platform-specific gratifications do users derive from their experiences with various types of digital media (e.g., visual social media compared to text-based forums compared to streaming services)?
5. How do users construe and navigate the contradictory gratifications and dissatisfactions (e.g., connection and loneliness; knowledge and overwhelm; escapism and anxiety) derived from their interactions with digital media?

2.4. Importance of the Study

This study contributes to theory, methodology, and practice.

Theoretical Importance: The main theoretical contribution of this study will be an extension and revitalization of Uses and Gratifications Theory. Moving beyond a quantitative, list approach, this study will employ an interpretive phenomenological lens that will offer a more in-depth and nuanced account of "gratifications" as lived, subjective experiences. This study directly responds to calls for the need for further conceptual development within UGT scholarship (Mateus, 2023). Additionally, integrating concepts from Media Ecology Theory will help formulate a more comprehensive framework that accounts for the powerful influence of the media environment on user needs and actions, thus bridging the micro-level psychological motivations of users and the macro-level technological consequences of media use. This shifts the theoretical conversation from a simple conception of an active user to a more complex dialectic between user agency and environmental affordances.

Methodological Importance: This study also brings methodological importance to Uses and Gratifications Theory by advocating for the use of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which is a qualitative research methodology that is underutilized in UGT studies. In demonstrating the value of using IPA to elicit rich, descriptive accounts of user experiences, this study provides a way forward for subsequent qualitative inquiries in media consumption studies by situating its findings in the participant's experience. The findings will provide an alternative method to survey-based inquiry that risks placing participants' experiences into pre-formed theoretical buckets. This methodology inductively formulates a variety of new concepts and themes rooted explicitly in the data collected, enhancing the ecological validity and depth of findings that are increasingly needed in communication research.

Practical and Social Importance: This study will help digital media creators and platform designers better understand user motivations to develop more ethical, user-centered experiences. Educators, parents, and mental health professionals would also find value in a better understanding of complex gratifications, but also pitfalls manifest from the use of digital media in order to create more effective digital literacy programs and interventions to deal with concerns such as problematic internet use and the consequences of its usage. Socially, the research provides a more informed public engagement about technological use in everyday life. This research will shed light on how individuals negotiate their relationships with media and foster a more critical and reflective understanding of how our tools for connection, information, and entertainment are remaking and continuing to remake our individual and collective well-being and lives.

2.5. Thesis Statement

This study concludes that to obtain a comprehensive understanding of media usage in the digital space of today, Uses and Gratifications Theory needs to be reconceptualized from an interpretive, phenomenological standpoint. This study will engage the lived experiences of individuals using digital media spanning the years 2015 to 2025 and demonstrate that gratifications are not static, pre-defined needs of the user, but are dynamic, constructed, and contextually shaped in a dialectical relationship between the user's agency and the techno cultural affordances of the media environment. Through an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, this thesis will code data and reveal emergent themes of gratification including: curated self-expression, algorithmically mediated connection, and affordances specific to various platforms that are not easily framed or categorized into traditional UGT typologies or constructs, therefore proposing a new, integrative theoretical framing of UGT and Media Ecology that captures the burgeoning complexity of the modern user engaged with their media world.

3. Theoretical Framework

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the theoretical context of the study by exploring two prominent theories of communication: Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) and media ecology theory. This chapter aims to outline key UGT principles, present media ecology theory as another way to analyze digital media gratifications and propose a combined framework for studying how people benefit from digital media today. An integrated approach to examining gratifications obtained from digital media usage provides a clear framework for understanding not only why people use digital media but also how the media surrounding them shapes their usage and gratifications.

3.1. Key Principles of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT)

Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) marks a paradigm shift in media research from passive audience assumptions, which characterize early effects research, to agency driven, active, goal-directed consumer of media. Emerging in the mid-twentieth century, UGT disrupts the question "What does media do to people?" to "What do people do with media?" (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973). In doing so, UGT anchors audience agencies in the communication process, presupposing that individuals can deliberately choose and use media to fulfill pre-existing needs and desires. UGT is fundamentally shaped by a set of key principles that are central to how it is applied.

First, UGT assumes that the audience is active and that their media use is goal-directed. Individuals are not passive consumers of media messages, but conscious media consumers who intendedly choose the media they use and the content they derive from their experience. Individuals intend to use media because they want to fulfill a range of needs, which can be cognitive (e.g. to acquire information, knowledge); affective (e.g. emotional experience; pleasure; escapism); personal integrative (e.g. enhancing credibility or self-esteem.); social integrative (e.g. involving family and friends in an experience); and tension release (e.g. to relax). In the context of modern digital platforms, such as multi-screen and on-demand viewing, these motivations, whether spanning the broad range or any particular subcategory, are the principal drivers of how an individual engages with a media platform- be it Netflix, Hulu, YouTube, or even TikTok (Camilleri, 2021).

Second, the onus on linking need gratifications to particular media use belongs to the audience member. This key principle affirms the independence of the individual. For instance, one audience member who feels a need for social contact might elect to use a social media site, whereas another who feels a similar social need might initiate a face-to-face contact with a friend in real life or call a family member on the phone, while another audience member might determine that a trip to a local coffee shop to listen to live music would also satisfy their need for social contact. UGT assumes that an individual has enough self-awareness, or symbolic interaction, to identify their own motives for using media, and therefore suggests that these motives are available for empirical examination with various techniques, such as surveys or interviews.

Third, media are in competition with other means of need satisfaction. UGT recognizes that media use is only one option available to an individual to satisfy their needs. For example, an individual meeting their need for social interaction can call a friend, go out with friends, or log onto a social media site. Therefore, media must be evaluated among other forms of human activity that compete with other forms of non-media related behaviors for the audience's time and attention. The value of a particular medium is that its perceived ability to satisfy a given need more successfully than other options available to the individual.

Fourth, UGT is non-evaluative about the cultural worth of mass media. UGT is not concerned about normative assessments of media content or even knowledge of media content. The theory focuses on audience orientations: what gratifications might users seek or obtain, and whether the content was high or low culture. This allows for expansive explorations of human interaction to study a wide variety of media phenomena—ranging from scholarly articles to viral social media—purely from a user's perspective. Even though these foundational assumptions offer a robust framework,

the present media ecology is characterized by interactivity, algorithm development, and user generated content, complicated and expands their original implementation. The concept of the "active audience" becomes more complicated in terms of where algorithmic curation subtly creates choice and suggests exposure to different forms of gratifications. The gratifications themselves have also changed, with different gratifications emerging from the affordances of digital media platforms. For example, gratifications may include those that fall under the umbrella of curated-self-expression, or building a personal brand. Thus, while the foundational concepts of UGT are the necessary starting point for this study, I will argue that they need to be supplemented in order to fully understand the contemporary digital media ecosystem.

3.2. *Media Ecology Theory as a Companion Theory*

To overcome the limitations of a purely individualistic approach and to recognize how the larger media ecology itself operates within and influences the experiences of individuals, as well as their agency, I add Media Ecology Theory as a companion theory. Media Ecology Theory, originally coined by Neil Postman, but primarily conceived by Marshall McLuhan theorizes that media are not merely channels for transmitting information, but environments themselves that create human perception, social structure, and experience. McLuhan's famous phrase, "the medium is the message," is at the heart of this theory because the medium of communication technology itself is more impactful and pervasive than anything carried by it (Tarigan, 2024).

Media Ecology Theory describes communication media as an interconnected, complex ecosystem. In the same way a biological ecosystem determines which organisms can flourish, every media ecosystem determines the type of communication, and social structure that can exist (Khalid, 2025). It encourages a holistic approach that examines how different media technologies interact with one another and human culture over time (Laskowska, 2019). From this perspective, the transition from oral cultures to literate cultures, or print-based societies to electronic societies represents a shift in human consciousness and social life. The Internet, social media, and mobile devices represent the beginning of another one of these shifts, creating a new media ecology that has its own biases and effects.

A major component of Media Ecology is the concept of media affordances or media biases. Every medium has characteristics that make it appropriate for certain types of communication, but inappropriate for others. For instance, printed media has a bias toward linear, logical, and detached thinking. Alternatively, electronic media, like television or certain forms of social media feeds, has a bias toward simultaneity, emotional interaction, and fragmented information. Although these are not deterministic, they create powerful tendencies in the way individuals think, feel, and interact with one another. The digital age in general offers a framework for understanding phenomena, like multitasking, operating under the assumption that all behavior is ultimately a choice of the user (UGT perspective), whereas media ecology is able to emphasize that multitasking is encouraged and shaped by the very structure of our multisensory digital environment (Sun, 2020).

Ultimately, this perspective shifts the focus away from merely the user's psychological motivations (UGT perspective) to include the techno-structural characteristics of the platforms. If this is the case, it begs the remaining questions of: how does the architecture of TikTok, in this example of what digital media is, (it always has to be as a piece of architecture) influence the types of gratifications sought and gratifications gained given the structure of the platform and its emphasis on short-form video and algorithmically discovered content? How does the architecture and bias of a text-based platform: X (formerly Twitter), influence the type of interaction and gratifications sought and gained, in comparison to a visually oriented platform like Instagram? Media Ecology compels us to examine the language of technology that structures experience, which is an important blind spot of UGT (Aditia, 2025). It introduces a challenge toward a fully autonomous user agency, while the user exercises agency is within an environment that is pre-structured with certain biases, thus shaping which gratifications are possible and how those gratifications are constructed.

3.3. UGT and Media Ecology Integration for Digital Media Analysis

While UGT has specific strengths when applied in the context of the "pull" factors of media use—internal motivation and needs that lead individuals toward media—the theory has known limitations in accounting for the "push" factors of the media environment in UGT's approach. Conversely, Media Ecology Theory provides a macro-level framework for understanding how media technologies influence culture and consciousness but can miss some of the individual agencies and choice involved due to differences in the analysis. An integrated theoretical framework that leverages the strengths of both provides a better opportunity to examine media use amidst the complexities of digital media. This study proposes such an integration to assess the lived experience of digital media gratifications.

The conceptual synergy of UGT and Media Ecology Theory rests in their relationships as complementary. UGT provides the theoretical lens to observe agencies, and how individuals actively choose media to satisfy their needs. Media Ecology provides the theoretical lens to observe environment, and how the technological structures and biases of digital media platforms condition, facilitate, and limit user actions, and the very needs they are seeking to gratify (Tarigan, 2024). Together they allow for a dialectical analysis of the user and the medium: individuals are acting on the media environment based upon their needs, while the environment is simultaneously acting on them, shaping their perceptions, behaviors, and even the evolution of their needs over time. This integration informs the research in three primary ways.

First, the study goes beyond a static list of gratifications by examining how gratifications are co-constructed by the user intentions and platform affordances. For instance, the gratification of "social connection" is dynamically different to experience on Facebook, which emphasizes reciprocal friending and group membership, than on TikTok where connections can be more ephemeral and Para socially mediated algorithmically. By integrating the two theories, this study can inquire about how the architecture of these platforms allows for a specific form of social gratification.

Second, the integrated perspective Hires provides applies a critical lens to the notion of "active audience." In an algorithmically curated media environment, user choice is often in response to a pre-selected, fixed set of options. The gratification obtained could be less to do with active seeking and more to do with the enjoyment of seamless, personalized discovery. Media Ecology Theory situates this experience in a larger technological environment, in that the environment is designed to orchestrate user behavior in predictable, monetizable patterns (Sun, 2020). UGT additionally helps disclose the subjective experience of the enjoyment of this orchestrated discovery, by inquiring if users view it as a gratifying service or instead a dormant form of manipulation.

Third, an integrated perspective is crucial in understanding the creation of new media practices and corresponding gratifications. Actions such as creating and sharing memes, engaging in viral challenges, or developing a curated personal profile are not only initiated within pre-existing psychological needs, but they are also emergent phenomena of designed technological affordances of digital media platforms (Aditia, 2025). An integrated framework allows this study to explore how the digital media environment provides opportunities for action that generate new gratifications that older forms of media lacked to provide. In conclusion, this study's theoretical framework builds upon a combination of Uses and Gratifications Theory and Media Ecology Theory. Uses and Gratifications Theory offers a framework of key principles: an active audience with a goal that overlays the process of gratifications (needs) and that in some way gratifications (needs) should be primary. While Media Ecology Theory builds upon the conceptual framework by focusing attention on the media environment itself: its biases, its structural make-up, its pervasive impressions on human experience. In this way, both perspectives are complementary in providing nuanced interpretive analysis of how individuals may seek forth meaning, connection, and gratifications (satisfactions) in the complex, modern digital media environment.

4. Literature Review

Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) has been a primary perspective to understand why people actively choose and use certain media to meet their needs. It was developed in an era with mass media, but as the media landscape has changed, theory's assumptions have been tested, modified, and extended. The decade from 2015-2025 will be one of the more significant in that regard, where social media matured, streaming services became prevalent, mobile entertainment burgeoned, and integration of algorithmic curation became part of their lives. This literature review compiles literature from that decade to note the trajectory of UGT, the application of UGT across different digital platforms, the adoption of qualitative approaches, and key gaps that need further research. My argument is that UGT is still a powerful theoretical approach, but the unique affordances and complexities of the digital environment require a more nuanced, critical, and methodological approach to fully capture the lived experiences of media gratification.

4.1. Evolving UGT in the Digital Era (2015-2025)

The period of 2015-2025 has created a crucible for Uses and Gratifications Theory, as this period has created an environment that is different than the one where UGT was created. The UGT premise--that audiences are active and goal-oriented media consumers-- has been affirmed and made all the more complicated in digital media's interactive and user-centered approach to building and cumulatively consuming media. At the beginning of this decade, research focused on shifting the typologies of the traditional gratifications (e.g., information, entertainment, social interaction, and escapism) to social networking sites and video-sharing platforms, among other digital platforms. Scholars confirmed established gratifications were still relevant, but gratifications happened in different ways through digital technologies (e.g., user-generated content, immediate social feedback).

Fast forwarding to the latter part of the decade, research began to see beyond "simply" applying established gratifications and began to move into a critical evolution of the theory. The concept of an "active audience" was examined with greater rigor. Media users can actively create their profiles, follow accounts and create their content which, in complexity, is formed through algorithm-based environments that were designed to increase user engagement. This creates tension between user agencies and technological determinism the early UGT models did not need to address. Because of that, the gratification seeking process, from the user perspective, was no longer a linear function of fulfilling needs, but a dynamically conscious user-capability negotiation of the subtle, yet persuasive, nature of digital organizing.

Table 1. Evolution of UGT in Digital Media Research (2015-2025).

Period	Research Focus	Key Theoretical Developments	Methodological Trends
2015-2017	Adapting traditional gratifications to social media platforms	Confirmation of established gratifications in digital contexts	Predominantly quantitative surveys
2018-2020	Critical examination of "active audience" concept	Integration with TAM, social psychology theories	Emergence of mixed methods approaches
2021-2023	Algorithmic influence on gratification-seeking	Consideration of platform affordances	Growth in qualitative inquiries
2024-2025	Platform-specific gratifications and user agency	Dialectical understanding of user-environment interaction	Interpretive and phenomenological methods

Source: Synthesized from Wibowo (2022), Mateus et al. (2023), Du et al. (2024).

Additionally, during this period, UGT was also blended with other theoretical perspectives for increased explanatory power. Studies incorporated social psychology constructs (e.g., social comparison, self-presentation) to help explain gratifications of curated online identity. Similar frameworks, such as the Technology Acceptance Model (TAM), were combined with UGT to consider the meanings of a platform's perceived utility and gratification. Researchers also began to consider users' pre-existing attitudes or behaviors, or digital literacy, as critical variables in the quest for gratifications (Xu, 2025). This blending of perspectives has signaled that in the convergence of digital media; no single theory or perspective can address the complexity of media use. Thus, the evolution of UGT can be framed as the direction shifting from a static application of UGT theory, to a moving, integrated, critical framework that has the potential to analyze the complex digital life.

4.2. UGT Application Across Digital Platforms

The usability of Uses and gratification Theory was apparent in the many ways it was employed during the 2015-2025 time period and the myriad digital platforms that proliferated during this time. Scholars have utilized UGT as a principal framework to identify why individuals select certain media to consume then engage with the platform itself, ranging from omnipresent social media platforms to often unique online communities (Du, 2024). UGT is particularly useful in its ability to account for the appeal of social media and specific platforms, as it provides a well-defined structure for organizing users' ambiguous motivations for utilizing platforms in the first place. Reasons why individuals use social media platforms often overlap; for example, many users experience gratifications like social connection, self-expression, information seeking, or entertainment. Many studies on social media platforms have been based on UGT and the applicability of UGT to social media confirms this theory has unique value when considering user choice and motivations (Wibowo, 2022).

UGT has also conducted research on newly formed types of digital media consumption. The growing popularity of video game streaming platforms, like Twitch and YouTube Gaming, has allowed researchers to explore gratifications not only from playing video games, but also from watching others play. While the motivations of gratifications from playing video games are not necessarily extended from watching others play video games, UGT offers scholars a framework for addressing the complex motivations put forth by motivations to watch. The gratifications associated with watching others play games are sometimes a combination of success in vicarious achievement (achievement that is not based on success), a feeling of community belonging (watching with others), learning new strategies or tips related to gameplay and then experiencing parasocial interaction (watching the streamer) with the streamer. Esports,

in addition to video game streaming platforms, have also utilized UGT to help define player persistence. The gratifications that stem from playing esports are sometimes a unique combination of competition, mastery, social recognition, or immersion (Nguyen, 2025). UGT has also shed light on emergent and novel economic behaviors in digital contexts. For example, purchasing virtual goods or currency extends beyond the gratifications of mere utility, as the gratifications stem from obtaining social status, aesthetic expression, or simply advancing and enhancing the gameplay experience (Kaur, 2020).

Table 2. Platform-Specific Gratifications Matrix.

Platform	Primary Gratifications	Unique Affordances	User Demographics
TikTok	Entertainment, trend participation, creative expression	Short-form video, algorithmic discovery	Gen Z, young millennials
Instagram	Curated self-expression, social validation, aesthetic inspiration	Visual storytelling, ephemeral content (Stories)	Millennials, Gen Z

LinkedIn	Professional networking, career development, and industry knowledge	Professional profiles, endorsements	Working professionals
Twitter/X	Real-time news, social commentary, public discourse	Brevity, real-time updates	Diverse age groups
Facebook	Social connection, group membership, information sharing	Groups, events, comprehensive profiles	Older millennials, Gen X
Twitch	Entertainment, community belonging, learning strategies	Live streaming, real-time interaction	Gaming enthusiasts
YouTube	Educational content, entertainment, parasocial relationships	Long-form video, diverse content types	All age groups

Source: Adapted from Ullah & Iqbal (2025), Ahmed (2025), Du et al. (2024), Nguyen (2025).

The vast range of uses of UGT during this time reveals an observable trend: gratifications are diversified and specialized based on platform affordances. The common and foundational gratifications (e.g. social connection, entertainment) have remained throughout uses of UGT, while the satisfaction of these gratifications have been contingent on the technological affordances of the platform. For example, Snapchat's ephemeral conversations styles are directed at satisfying gratifications differently than LinkedIn's professional development processes, or immersive virtual reality video games. Given this, the literature on UGT from the years of 2015-2025 presented a unique quilt of platform focused studies. This also speaks to future directions for UGT, as this literature highlights a challenge of synthesizing each of the studies that consider how individuals navigate the entire digital media universe in- order to find gratifications, rather than a single, or couple of platforms.

Ultimately, the literature demonstrates the utility of UGT while given the exorbitantly fluid nature of content consumption and platform permeability, we should explore how to engage in analyses that cross platforms while also accounting for how the contemporary practice of consuming media is more complex than static studies on social media and other digital platforms.

4.3. Qualitative Inquiries into UGT Research

Historically, quantitative surveys have been the predominant form of UGT research; however, in 2015-2025 there has been a considerable and indicative shift moving toward qualitative methodologies. The shift toward qualitative methodologies comes from a recognition that the subtleties of media gratifications (i.e. subjective experiences, latent motivations, contextual complexities) as explored through quantitative survey research tend to be limited to Likert scale selections or other methods aligned with pre-constructed survey items. Specifically, instead of merely seeking to understand what gratifications were being sought, qualitative inquiry allows for researchers to understand how and why users experience gratifications in complex contexts that are lived realities for users. The methodological expansion has enhanced the explanatory power of UGT in contemporary media research.

Interpretive methods, such as phenomenology and thematic analysis, have also gained traction, and studies that utilize in-depth semi-structured interviews have produced valuable and detailed descriptions of users' experiences in ways that quantitative measures cannot. For example, there is qualitative research using data from university students' TikTok use that produced meaningful themes related to identity experimentation, coping with academic stress, and navigating trends, therefore, gratifications that may not be captured in a standardized survey (Ullah, 2025). By allowing the voice of the participant to be central in these studies, the user-and user gratifications-have the potential to emerge from data collection that was not already embedded in typologies. This inductive

process is tremendously important in an ever-changing media landscape where new platforms and features will continue to develop new ways for users to experience and engage in gratifications.

Moreover, the mixed-method design is becoming more common, which is undoubtedly an incredibly constructive way to triangulate findings in order to develop more robust insights. A typical mixed-method study would first conduct qualitative interviews that explore and identify key gratification themes in the digital setting (i.e., esports) and then use those inductively generated survey themes to develop a quantitative survey for further generalizability and empirical testing (Nguyen, 2025). A mixed-method approach capitalizes on the strengths of each methodological approach: qualitative data provides rich, contextual provisions, while quantitative data offers generalizability and statistical analysis rigor. This methodological pluralism reflects a level of maturity in UGT scholarship and allows for progress in this area of research to continue through research faculty that want to re-examine and extend UGT theory for the contemporary media environment with methods that are as fluid, complex, and user centered as the phenomenon being researched. The qualitative approach does not diminish quantitative measurement; it complements and enhances UGT research.

4.4. Identified Gaps and Limitations in Current UGT Scholarship

Although UGT continues to be meaningful and relevant to the contemporary media context, the UGT scholarship produced between 2015-2025 reveals important gaps and limitations that this study seeks to expand upon. One issue that emerged in a systematic review of UGT literature is a tendency for research papers applying UGT to be cited for being bare bones. These papers could cite knowledge of UGT as a framing approach, without training in engaging with conceptually and methodologically to consider and evaluate its limits, assumptions, and deeper theoretical contributions (Mateus, 2023). Creating this system of applying UGT theory to UGT research without creating new contributions could hurt the UGT theory, since in the absence of contributions to UGT, it turns into descriptive, deconstructive checklists of motivations instead of an explanatory framework that could be alive. There is a strong need for research that explores the ways in which users apply UGT in meaningful ways and for that research to make original contributions to the theory in relation to contemporary media phenomenon.

The second limitation is UGT's theory of gratifications-seeking has a challenge to articulate with the relational and compromised user agency with the architecture of the platform's implications, algorithms. UGT theoretically frames the user as active and goal-oriented, but it does not necessarily explicate how needs and gratifications would be modeled, recommended, and sometimes constructed through algorithmic curation systems. The gratification-seeking process may be creatively less about seeking but rather about responsive engagement with a personalized, algorithmic produced flow of content. Most scholarships have approached this dialectic in few transactions, and there is still considerable gap in understanding how agency is recognized and lived in technologically mediated environments.

Third, there are also limitations when we consider UGT in relation to different demographics and their novel media practices like Generation Z consuming experiential travel content on social media platforms. There is evidence that the existing theorizing about UGT may be inadequate to explain the motivations of younger generations who are enacting media behavior that is explicitly tied with their identity construction and the digital economy of experiences (Kim, 2025). Similarly, the theory has also been critiqued for having a functionalist bias, because it mostly focuses on the "functions" of media use, i.e., the positive or neutral effects of media use. When a user seeks social connection or entertainment, the result of that pursuit may mean digital addiction, misinformation, social comparison anxiety or being trapped in an echo chamber. Ultimately, media use is a complicated phenomenon that requires theorizing to understand by looking at the gratifications sought along with the unintended and problematic consequences of that fulfillment. Lastly, more research is needed based on the known complexity of relationships between different gratifications and exploration from under-theorized areas, like what has been noted as an under theorized aspect

of new digital behaviors like purchasing virtual goods (Kaur, 2020). Working through those limitations—by not just applying UGT in a superficial way, interrogating the influence of algorithms, focusing on emerging user behavior and what that tells us, and calling attention to dysfunctions—will be essential to help the continued relevance and potency of UGT.

5. Methodology

In this chapter, I introduce the methodological framework created to study the lived experiences of digital media users and the gratifications they pursue and achieve. This study aims to revisit Uses and Gratifications (UGT) within the media context today defined by interactivity, algorithmic curation, and platform convergence. Thus, I decided to utilize a qualitative design as the best way to capture the depth, nuance, and subjectivity of user experiences. The sections that follow will address the research paradigm, qualitative design, sampling and recruitment procedures, data collection procedures, data analysis methods, and trustworthiness and ethical issues.

5.1. Research Paradigm: An Interpretative Framework

This study utilized an interpretative research paradigm to investigate the subjective, complex, and social nature of digital media gratifications. In the interpretive paradigm, which originated from philosophical traditions, such as hermeneutics and phenomenology, social reality is not an objectified, external thing but rather social reality is always constructed and reproduced through discursive interpretations and collectively constructed meanings (Brennen, 2021). This paradigm is a fit for communication and media studies, which often focus on how individuals make sense of media messages, technologies, and their lived experiences in daily life (Lindlof, 2017). Unlike positivist approaches that seek to uncover universal laws and causal relationships through quantitative measures, interpretivism hopes to achieve a deep contextualized understanding of human experience, from the perspective of those living it.

Choosing an interpretive paradigm responded to the inability of a purely quantitative approach to accurately evaluate our contemporary media uses. Surveys and experiments can measure how often one consumes media or how specific uses correlate with gratifications as defined by predetermined gratifications; however, they will not fully explore the "why" of those actions. They do not capture the fluid, sometimes unconscious, and situationally contingent process of seeking gratifications in a digital environment where consumption and production, active seeking and passive receiving, are increasingly blurred. The interpretive approach assumes media users are not merely data points, but actors that make meaning out of their interactions with technology (Faulkner, 2024). As media studies focus has begun to shift to examine the multi-faceted nature of life in the age of social media, interpretative and qualitative methods have become necessary for producing rich, insightful knowledge (Firdaus, 2025).

In terms of the research process, this paradigm situates the researcher from an understanding that the researcher is not a detached and objectivist observer, but rather, an instrument of inquiry engaged in an interpretative act with the participants (Lindlof, 2017). Whereas more traditional research approaches would require simply a test of a hypothesis, an interpretive frame seeks to allow theoretical insights to surface during the process through the detailed, thick descriptions of the participants lived experiences experienced. The subjective meaning in the research questions—what individuals think about their lived experiences and meaning making toward UGT and digital media—is best met using an interpretivist approach, which also aligns with the exploratory nature of the study that wished to discover how individuals make sense of their experiences on digital platforms. In this regard, the study aspires to create a rich, idiographic understanding of digital media gratifications, honoring the complexity of individual sense-making while also providing an efficacious basis for re-examining UGT, and extending it into the 21st century (Brennen, 2021).

5.2. Qualitative Research Design: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

In developing the interpretive paradigm, this study utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as its specific qualitative research design. IPA is a methodology that seeks to deeply examine how individuals make sense of their personal and social worlds through the lived experience of a particular phenomenon (Tuffour, 2017). IPA is "phenomenological" because it focuses on participants' subjective reality and lived experience, and "interpretive" because it acknowledges that accessing participant experience is a dynamically interpretive process by both the participant (in terms of sense-making of their world), and the researcher (in terms of sense making of the participant account) (Firdaus, 2025). IPA is central to the double interpretive process, also referred to as the "double hermeneutic".

The rationale for choosing IPA is well aligned with the intent of this study for several reasons. First, the core phenomenon within this research - seeking and obtaining gratification from the media - is fundamentally an existential and subjective experience (Tuffour, 2017). Grants are not objective variables of media platforms, they are meanings and feelings given from the unique interaction between an individual's psychological needs, the social context, and the given affordances of a technology. IPA is a strong framework for meaningfully engaging with these personal, often taken-for-granted experiences, instead of simply undertaking self-reports of media use and the meanings, feelings and significances the participants connected their digital practices to. Next, IPA fits the intent of the study to generate new theoretical insights to further develop existing models. IPA is idiographic, beginning with an in-depth case-by-case analysis of each individual accounts and developing to identify broader, cross-case patterns, or themes, from the overall accounts. This intensive focus on the particularities entails the discovery of new or overlooked aspects to the phenomenon, that is essential to the speed at which the media environment changes, to the extent that established gratifications typologies, may no longer suffice. The overall analysis is grounded in the rich detail of the individual contracts that stem from this purposeful selection process and will elicit themes that in depth relate to the participants' lived situations and provide a poignant counter to the broader findings determined through quantitative studies.

This analysis draws on detailed individual contracts from a purposeful selection process to identify themes closely tied to participants' experiences, offering meaningful context to complement broader quantitative findings.

Lastly, the philosophical assumptions associated within the methods of IPA, regardless of its phenomenological and hermeneutics affiliations, extends from the same theoretical stance that forms this study, especially for the inclusion of UGT with Media Ecology Theory (Lindlof, 2017). Thus, while UGT presumes an active, goal directed user, IPA provides methodological tools to study the distinctions in the interpretive "activity" itself from the user experience. IPA allows for generative scholarship opportunities to study the ways in which the "media environment" (a specific concept in the Media Ecology Theory) is subjectively experienced and co-created by each individual case as the individual attempts to satisfy their needs. While practically, IPA necessitates semi-structured interview protocols to pry rich, detailed narratives about participants everyday engagement with digital media. The major analysis for the narratives will be to identify and isolate emergent themes with each participant narrative and or from their collective narratives; while devoting attention to the imaginative words, constructs, metaphors and stories they utilize to explain their experiences. Ultimately, IPA will generate an in-depth and textured understanding of digital media gratifications for the current context.

5.3. Sampling Strategy and Participant Recruitment

In keeping with the framework of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and the broader objectives of qualitative inquiry, this study used a non-probability, purposive sampling approach. Purposive sampling consists of purposely recruiting participants who have direct experience with the phenomena of interest, have knowledge about the topic, and can generate rich, insightful, and relevant data (Faulkner, 2024). Whereas probability of sampling is about getting

something that is statistically representative of a larger population, the goal here is to gain informational richness and depth. For an IPA study, which generally utilizes smaller homogeneous samples, the defining characteristic is that the participants are capable of talking about the topic in a way to generate a rich understanding of that topic.

The population for this study was defined as adults between ages 20-35, who are active, daily users of multiple digital media platforms. This age range was selected because it represents a cohort of individuals that have grown up during the explosion in social media and digital platform availability (or referred to as "digital natives" or late millennials/early Gen Z). Their media habits are established while also adapted through extensive innovations of technologies and technological change, positioning them as ideal informants for a study examining how individuals engage with media in contemporary contexts. The criterion of using "multiple platforms daily" (e.g., social media, video streaming, messaging applications, news aggregators) was established to ground participant responses in the converged media environment, as well as to have participants consider their decision-making and gratifications across different platforms and technologies. The study sought homogeneity around participant deep engagement with digital media while allowing for a variety of diversity across demographic characteristics such as profession, education, and gender to better capture several lived experiences within the context of this shared experience.

Participants were recruited using professional networks for recruitment along with university announcements and utilized snowball sampling. The first recruitment notice was sent through internal university email lists and professional social media networks (e.g., LinkedIn). The recruitment announcement described the study including research purpose, how to participate (in-depth interview and media diary recording), time needed to participate, and eligibility criteria. The advertisement emphasized that the study is designed to understand personal experiences with digital media in daily life. Interested individuals were asked to complete short screening questionnaire to verify eligibility determined by age and media habits (e.g. used platforms daily).

From the pool of eligible respondents, the final sample consisted of twelve participants. The sample size used in this study aligns with established samples sizes for IPA research that emphasizes depth of analysis over breadth of analysis. A smaller sample tends to facilitate the intensive, case-by-case engagement that the methodology necessitates. Snowball sampling was minimally used, with an invitation to refer to other individuals who met the study criteria. Snowball sampling was useful for accessing potential participants, that may not have been identified using the previous methods.

Table 3. Participant Demographics.

Characteristic	Distribution	N = 12
Gender		
Female	58.3%	7
Male	41.7%	5
Age Range		
20-24	25.0%	3
25-29	41.7%	5
30-35	33.3%	4
Education Level		
Bachelor's Degree	50.0%	6
Master's Degree	41.7%	5
Doctoral Degree	8.3%	1

Daily Platform Use		
3-4 platforms	33.3%	4
5-6 platforms	50.0%	6
7+ platforms	16.7%	2
Professional Background		
Technology/IT	25.0%	3
Education	25.0%	3
Creative Industries	16.7%	2
Business/Finance	16.7%	2
Healthcare	16.7%	2

Note: All participants reported daily use of multiple digital media platforms and resided in metropolitan areas.

Once respondents confirmed their participation, everyone received additional details about the study with an information sheet and consent form. The information sheet reiterated the study goals, ensured anonymity and confidentiality, stated their ability to withdraw from the study at any time and conditions for withdrawal, along with how data would be stored and used in an academic context. This ethical procedure seeks to facilitate that study participation is voluntary, informed, and transparent, despite it fell short on participant informed consent; which supports the foundation of trust from the researcher to participants necessary to foster open and reflective accounts to support a successful IPA study (Boyle, 2023). The final voting sample consisted of seven female and five male participants from varied professional and education backgrounds, resided in metropolitan cities, and confirmed they were active, multi-platform digital media users.

5.4. Data Collection Techniques: In-Depth Interviews, and Media Diaries

The methodological design of this study arises from the interpretive paradigm, aligning with the aim of capturing rich, textured, subjective, lived experience. To achieve the depth required for Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), a multi-method qualitative approach was employed, involving in-depth, semi-structured interviews, in conjunction with media diaries, authored by participants. This dyadic method will produce a dataset capturing both reflective insights and immediate experiences with digital media. The in-depth interviews are uniquely suited to provide a space where participants can share personal interpretations, motivations, and feelings about their media use retrospectively, while the inclusion of media diaries provides a contemporaneous record of media use, reducing memory-based recall bias and capturing the nuanced details of everyday experience with media. Together, these two methods embrace a hallmark of qualitative inquiry, generating thick, descriptive data from multiple perspectives regarding a phenomenon (Brennen, 2021). In addition, using this data collection approach reflects an intentional selection of methods to engage and ultimately do a deep dive into the "what" and "how" of participant experience, central to the phenomenological work (Tuffour, 2017).

5.4.1. In-Depth, Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary method of data collection in this study involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were selected because, unlike structured interviews, which feature a closed set of predetermined questions, or unstructured interviews, which often feature an unstructured discussion, the semi-structured interview format provides a framework of themes and open-ended questions, while allowing latitude to probe, follow emergent ideas, and explore unexpected paths of discussion (Dunne, 2010). This flexibility is important for IPA, as the emphasis

of the work is not to test pre-specified hypotheses or objectives, but rather to understand the participant world from the participant perspective. An in-depth, semi-structured interview acts as a vehicle for participants to share their personal "sense-making" around digital media gratifications that otherwise might go unnoticed and remain tacit in their daily lives (Firdaus, 2025).

Both the interviews and the media diaries formed the main data set for this study. The interview protocol was based on key areas derived from the research questions and criteria of the theoretical framework for the study and included an exploration of motivations for use (and expectations), lived experience of interaction (media co-use), the feelings that were elicited from and through different platforms, and perceived consequences of media consumption. The questions asked were purposely broad and not leading and intended to generate more narrative responses. Examples of questions included: "Can you walk me through a typical day of your media use, from when you wake up to when you go to sleep?"; "Tell me about a time you felt particularly connected to others, regarding social media"; "How do you decide what you want to read or watch when you are between commitments?" Probing questions were used frequently to encourage deeper reflection on responses, including: "What was that like for you?"; "Can you tell me more about that feeling?"; and "What do you mean by 'escapism,' in that event? This researcher's use of carefully designed questions follows ethnographic interviewing methods that prioritize participant-driven narratives over researcher-led questioning (Source, 2019). The interpretive work of the researcher is active during the interview, and listening is a critical skill not only to what is said, but how it is said—the pauses, emotional inflections, metaphors, etc.—as they are interwoven and interconnected to the participants lived experience (Lindlof, 2017).

Each participant underwent two interviews. The first interview was 90-120 minutes long and took place after the participant completed the recruitment and consent process. This first interview focused on rapport building and providing broad, life-world connections to their media practices, personal history with technology, and general attitudes toward digital platforms. The second interview, also 90-120 minutes long, was held after completion of the one-week media diary. The second interview was important for data analysis as it utilized the media diary entries as the discussion launch point (a technique referred to as photo-elicitation in the case of photographs, and "diary-elicitation" in the case of diary entries). This use of media entries allowed for an organization of the interview to be tied to participants documented instances of media use, which enabled a much more precise interrogation of their thoughts and feelings at that same moment in time. Examples of prompts in the second interview included: "I noticed that you said you felt anxious after using this app. Can you tell me more about what was happening for you at that moment?" and "Your diary indicates you spent two hours on YouTube watching documentary clips. What was happening for you based on your motivation to do that?" The design of the two-interview process allowed for broad exploration and then deeper incident-specific engagement, layering the data and building credibility across the findings.

5.4.2. Qualitative Media Diaries

To help balance the reflective nature of the interviews, participants were asked to keep a qualitative media diary for a continuous week. Media diaries are a powerful ethnographic tool used to capture and document data about media consumption patterns, within their natural ecological context, and reduce the biases that might develop in a longer recall-based study (Berg, 2012). Quantitative diaries often focus on tracking measures of time and frequency; however, the qualitative diary used in this study was designed to document the phenomenological elements of media use: context, motivations (gratifications sought), and affective responses (gratifications obtained). This method provides insight into the "background" nature of contemporary media, where media consumption is often done in shades of fragmentation, multitasking, and integrated within the day-to-day experience (Berg, 2012).

Participants were provided with a choice of format to maximize comfort and compliance: (structured) digital document (e.g., a doc, Google Doc template), private social media account (e.g.,

locked Instagram or X account), or physical notebook. The reasoning behind providing multiple formats was both ethical and practical--it was ethical to allow participants to connect the format to their own media preferences and ability to do so. The diary template prompt asked for each significant interaction with the media that they engaged with. The prompts included:

1. **Time and Place:** When and where (e.g., 8:15 AM, on the bus to work)?
2. **Platform/Medium:** What specific app, website, or device? (e.g., Instagram, Spotify, Netflix on a laptop)?
3. **Activity:** What were they doing? (e.g., scrolling the feed, listening to a playlist, watching a specific show).
4. **Reason for Use (Gratification Sought):** Why did they choose to interact at that moment? (e.g., "I was bored," "I wanted to see what my friends were up to," "I needed to de-stress after a meeting.")
5. **Feelings and Reactions (Gratification Obtained):** How did they feel during and after the interaction? (e.g., "Amused," "Connected," "Anxious," "Informed," "Disappointed").

Participants were invited to write in a free and reflective style. We aimed for The participants' focus was on honesty rather than 'correct' answers. We suggested that they log three to five important media interactions per day. They were invited to log more if they wanted, but we wanted to keep them focused on a manageable level of importance rather than the totality of media interactions they engaged in. An 'important interaction' we defined as media use over a couple of minutes of duration or something that evoked a strong emotional or cognitive response. We selected this format to ensure the diaries captured important experiences and not be an exhaustive and burdensome record of every split second of engagement with media, we were hoping to spare our participants that burden by the end. The completed diaries were an important source of data in their own merit and in terms of the timeline and context of their media engagement. More importantly, as noted previously, the diaries served as an important stimulus for the second interview, allowing for a detailed and memory supported dialog on meaningful moments of media consumption, and the gratifications received from those experiences.

Table 6. Media Diary Entry Patterns.

Time of Day	Most Common Platform	Primary Gratification Sought	Average Duration
Morning (6-9 AM)	Instagram, News apps	Information, social updates	15-30 minutes
Midday (12-2 PM)	LinkedIn, Twitter	Professional networking, news	20-40 minutes
Evening (6-9 PM)	TikTok, YouTube	Entertainment, relaxation	60-120 minutes
Night (9 PM-12 AM)	Netflix, Gaming platforms	Escapism, immersive entertainment	90-180 minutes
Late Night (After 12 AM)	Reddit, Discord	Community interaction, niche interests	30-60 minutes

Source: Analysis of 84 diary entries (12 participants × 7 days).

5.5. Data Analysis Process: Thematic Analysis and Grounded Theory Principles

The analysis process in this study was grounded in a process that attempted to be systematic, rigorous, and meaningful, in-line with the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). The main analysis strategy was reflexive thematic analysis, which focuses on identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) in the data. As we noted before, the overall intent is under the umbrella of IPA, but the procedural steps that includes themes was inspired by the systematic coding processes associated with Grounded Theory Method (GTM) in particular the constant comparison and analysis. This hybrid process allows for a structured yet nuanced process, to make

sure the resultant themes were firmly "grounded" in the participants recounting while being interpreted through the study's theoretical lenses (Pratap, 2025). Our intent was not a summary of the data, instead, we sought to move the discussion from a description of what participants said to an analysis of what their experiences mean concerning their digital media gratifications (Galea, 2025).

5.5.1. Data Preparation and Immersion

The first phase of analysis began immediately following the data collection. All audio recordings from the in-depth interviews were professionally transcribed verbatim; the transcriptions were then checked against the original audio recordings for accuracy. As we checked the original recordings for accuracy, we once again attend to the nuances of pauses, laughter, sighs, or other non-verbal cues that can signify emotional tone and significance. The qualitative media diaries were compiled, formatted consistently with each participant's transcripts, and collated into a case file. This assignment created a case file for each participant containing their first interview transcript, their seven-day media diary, and their second interviews transcripts.

Once data was prepared, we moved to analysis that included a time of deep immersion. This important phase involved reading and rereading each case file several times to cultivate a holistic and intimate understanding of each participant's world. This process is the crux of phenomenological inquiry, entailing elements of "dwelling" with the data, bracketing, and seeing the world from the participant's experiences. During the immersion stage we made initial reflective notes, memos, and observational comments in the margins of the transcripts and diaries. These notes were exploratory. We made notes of first impressions, interesting phrases, potential contradictions, and connections to the research questions. This immersion reading is important as it helps to avoid an imposed and superficial early coding process and remain sensitive to the complex nuances and compressions of each individual account before proceeding to cross-case analysis.

5.5.2. Iterative Coding and Theme-Development

After the immersion phase, analysis moved into a more formal systematic coding process, and case-by-case analysis, as outlined in IPA. The coding process had three distinct but overlapping stages in the coding, borrowing components of GTM to enhance rigor.

1. **Initial/Open Coding:** The first stage was to analyze the entire dataset line by line, working on one participant's case at a time. At this initial or open coding phase, the data was disassembled into small manageable segments including phrases, sentences or paragraphs. Each segment of data was then assigned descriptive open codes to represent the essence of that segment. For example, if one participant said, "I just find myself opening Instagram without thinking every time I have a spare second... it's like a muscle memory thing," then this statement may have been coded as "habitual use," "automatic behavior," or "filling empty time." This was the phase that focused closest to the language and meaning of the participant experience. The intention at this open coding stage was to generate an exhaustive and nuanced list of codes that represented all the experiences discussed. I undertook this process diligently for the complete case files of each participant.
2. **Focused/Axial Coding and Development of Categories:** Once preliminary coding was completed for several cases, the focus of analysis shifted towards a more interpretive phase. This involved a process of constant comparison, engaging in comparative coding with other codes within and across cases to notice similarities, differences and relationships. The descriptive codes were grouped together into higher order conceptual categories. For instance, codes entitled "habitual use," "boredom relief," and "fear of missing out," may have been grouped under a broad conceptual category of "Compulsive Connectivity." As part of this coding process, I wrote analytical memos where I considered the properties and dimensions of each category, examining what it meant and how the category related to other categories. This process mirrors the axial coding stage of Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM), whereby the researcher begins

developing a more coherent and theoretical perspective about the phenomenon by connecting concepts together.

3. **Thematic Analysis and Integration:** The last stage shifted the focus from codes and categories to themes. This was the most interpretive step in the analysis. Once the researcher generated the categories, I reviewed the analytic memos and returned to the raw data for a final iteration to identify central patterns, or recurrent thematic responses that permeated throughout most participant experiences. The theme was more than simply a topic bucket, but rather, it encompassed a significant, patterned response or meaning within the dataset and thus illustrated an important facet of the lived experience of digital media gratification. For instance, the category entitled "Curating an Ideal Self" may have been synthesized with "Seeking Validation - Likes" and "Performing for Audience" to form the superordinate theme of "The Gratification of Curated Self-Expression." This entire process involved a dialectical movement between the data, the codes, the categories and the emergent thematic structure, which contributed to the larger project of constructing themes that were representative of the data but also analytically rich and significant in light of the research questions. This iterative refinement continued until a coherent and comprehensive thematic structure was established that vividly illuminated the core gratifications that users sought and obtained about their uses of and engagement with digital media in today's milieu.

5.6. Ensuring Trustworthiness: Validity, Reflexivity and Ethical Considerations

In qualitative research, the traditional positivist concepts of reliability and validity are often reconceptualized within the domain of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness refers to how credible, transferable, dependable and confirmable the findings are in a study. This section describes the strategies that were used in this study to uphold these concepts, with a particular emphasis on scholars' concerns with interpretive validity through rigorous methodologies, maintaining researcher reflexivity, and following strict ethical practices throughout the research process (Rose, 2020). Overall, the goal of the research is to produce research that is methodologically precise, yet transparent, ethical and reflective of the lived experiences of study participants (Humphreys, 2021).

5.6.1. Credibility and Validity

Credibility or internal validity refers to how confident we can be about the truth of the research findings. Credibility addresses the following question: Did the findings reflect the realities of the participants? Several strategies were used in this study to promote credibility and what is sometimes called "interpretive validity" or the extent that the researchers' interpretations reflect the meaning that the participants were conveying (Lunnay, 2015).

1. **Triangulation of Sources of Data:** Triangulation occurred in this study with two different methods of data collection, which offered one means of cross-validating findings. For example, gratification described reflectively during the interview could be written down in the participant's diary and observed and contextualized in-the-moment. Any discrepancies between the two data sets were not considered failures, but a starting point for deeper inquiry. During the second interview, I asked participants related questions, specifically to follow-up on contradictory diary entries, which often revealed richer aspects of the participant's experience.
2. **Prolonged Engagement:** Due to the research design, there were multiple points of contact with each participant over several weeks, including initial contact, a first in-depth interview, a week of diary input, and then a final in depth-interview. As a result, the prolonged engagement helped build rapport and trust that encouraged participants to be more open and honest about their experiences. It also provided the researcher with a more thorough and contextual understanding of each participant's life-world, in turn reducing the chances of misinterpreting the participant's experience.
3. **Member Checking (Participant Validation):** Some form of member checking occurred in this research to help establish the interpretive validity of the findings (Humphreys, 2021).

Specifically, in the second interview, the researcher often synthesized key points from the first interview and the diary, asking the participant, "I am getting the sense you engage this platform primarily to experience a sense of social connection, particularly when lonely. Does this sound right?" The feedback process generally provided participant confirmation, clarification, or correction of the researcher's rapidly developing interpretations to ensure that the analysis was 'grounded' in the participant's lived experience. Progressively throughout the analysis and after the thematic analysis was near completion, a summary of themes was sent to a subset of participants who received the option to provide follow-up feedback at the end of the analysis. Participants' feedback was utilized to further enhance the verbiage and emphases of the themes. Continuously receiving feedback from participants throughout the analysis process greatly enhanced the credibility of the final report.

5.6.2. Researcher Reflexivity

In interpretive research, the researcher is the primary research instrument for data collection and analysis. Therefore, attending to and navigating researcher subjectivity is critical to the trustworthiness of the research study (Rose, 2020). Reflexivity is the ongoing process of critical self-reflection about one's own subjectivities, biases, assumptions, and positionality and how they were influencing the research process and findings.

A reflexive journal was used throughout this study. Before beginning data collection, I began a journal entry of my own assumptions regarding digital media, and Uses and Gratifications Theory and what the participants may have experienced. I wrote some of my own media habits, and positive and negative experiences with social media, and what my theoretical leanings were. During data collection and analysis, I documented methodological choices made, analytical hunches, and my personal experiences while reading the participant narratives. For example, if I could relate personally to a participant's narrative about feeling "information overload," I would make a note to be more aware of separating my experience from the participant's unique experience in the coding process. The journal served a useful process in the reflexivity and transparency of the research process, provided an audit trail of the analytical process, which I believe helped ensure that the last interpretation of the data collected reflected the participants and was not a result of my unexamined assumptions (Humphreys, 2021).

5.6.3. Ethical Considerations

Adhering to ethical principles guided the research participant selection process and adhered to policies and practices to protect every participant's dignity and well-being. The protocol was submitted and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before any recruitment or data collection began. The ethical consideration framework for this research was rooted in informed consent, confidentiality, and minimization of harm (Boyle, 2023).

1. **Informed Consent:** A process of informed consent was conducted with every participant. The potential participants received an information sheet, detailing the study's purpose, time commitment (two interviews, one week-long diary), and what types of questions would be asked about their participation. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants were informed about how their data would be used, stored, and reported. Written consent was collected from each participant prior to the start of the first interview.
2. **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** All identifiable data was collected to protect participant privacy. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym which was used for all transcripts, diaries, and research reports. Any elements of identifying details that were shared during the participants' interviews (e.g., employers, location) were anonymized in the transcripts. All raw data (including audio recordings and original consent forms) were stored in a secure, encrypted, and password-protected drive, where I was the only person who could access the data.

3. **Minimizing Harm:** The research addressed issues that are potentially sensitive (e.g., anxiety, loneliness, addiction) from media use. The researcher was trained to conduct interviews with sensitivity and compassion. Participants were reminded at the beginning of each interview that they could choose not to answer a question, if that question made them uncomfortable, and if they needed to, they could stop the interview at any time. Ultimately, participants could reflect on their potentially negative experiences, so in addition to these reminders, I provided participants with a list of free/low-cost mental health resources in the information sheet; therefore, if anyone needed emotional support during this process, they had a resource to follow up as a supportive pathway. This is aligned with the researcher's responsibility to collect data on individuals, but also to ensure their well-being and that everyone (or most) is safe in the ethical use of participant data. The ethical use of participant data will ultimately contribute to high-quality, valid, and socially responsible communication research (Lunnay, 2015).

6. Results

In this chapter, I present the findings generated from the two rounds of interviews and media diaries, which were analyzed using detailed interpretative phenomenological analysis, that provided the data of participants lived experiences of engagement with digital media. Following thematic analysis and based on the principles of grounded theory that would allow themes to emerge and be developed organically, four rich themes are presented below, that encapsulates a major realm of what gratifications participants sought and obtained between the years of 2015 and 2025 and the interactions between user agency, technological affordances, and wider lives of digital existence.

Table 4. Emergent Themes from IPA Analysis.

Theme	Description	Representative Quote	Frequency
Curated Self-Expression	Active construction of digital identity through selective sharing	"It's my highlight reel... I get to choose what pieces of my story are visible"	12/12
Algorithmically Mediated Connection	Seeking authentic relationships within system-designed spaces	"You have to fight the feed to find the real stuff"	11/12
Information-Escapism Convergence	Seamless navigation between cognitive and affective needs	"My way of catching up with the world while also de-stressing"	10/12
Platform-Specific Gratifications	Distinct motivations aligned with platform affordances	"They are for completely different purposes"	12/12

Source: Primary data from participant interviews and media diaries.

The themes are (1) The Gratification of Curated Self-Expression, (2) The Pursuit of Connection in Algorithmically Shaped Environments, (3) Negotiating Information and Escapism in Converged Media, and (4) The New Gratifications of Platforms. Each theme is presented with quotes from participants to supplement the ideas pulled from participants and provide concrete examples of their lived experiences.

6.1. Theme 1: The Gratification of Curated Self-Expression

One of the most prevalent gratifications sought by participants was the construction and expression of a curated identity. Participants used digital platforms as stages for identity performances (and not just for communication). What I describe above as a curated self is a conscious,

continuous, and complicated act that goes beyond self-disclosure. Participants were clearly gratified by generating a digital self that aligned with their ideal self by showcasing achievements, interests, and aesthetics in a controllable way. As one participant explained about using Instagram, "it's my highlight reel... I get to choose what pieces of my story are visible. I get real pleasure from building that narrative and presenting to the world the me I want to be." As from Goffman (1959), curating self has a purpose and in this case, it was to create a curated identity that would manage impressions and validate self-concept.

This gratification relates closely to the built-in feedback mechanisms on platforms. Likes, comments, and shares serve as immediate social affirmation, reinforcing a curated identity. Further, gratification is something that is obtained, in two forms: the inherent satisfaction of creatively curating self and the extrinsic affirmation of an online audience. One participant said the following about her post that did well: "When a post does well, it isn't just the numbers. I have to feel like people are seeing me and affirming the intended version of me I'm putting out there – and that feels affirming." This finding suggests that the gratification of self-expression in the current context of digital media is inherently dialogic, whereby the user's curated output is co-constructed with the audience's response. The participants engaged in creative behaviors, such as selecting pictures of a food experience, writing a caption, including hashtags, and contributing to a gratified ritual to self-reflect and engaging in creativity.

6.2. Theme 2: The Pursuit of Connection in Algorithmically Shaped Environments

Despite the biological and social impetus of the need for social connection in various forms remaining a reason for using media, the ways and forms of the pursuit and achievement of this in the current context has mediated through modern, algorithmically based social platforms. All ten participants reported using digital media to connect with existing relationships and to form new relationships within niche communities. The gratifications here occur through the feelings of belonging, mutual support, and shared identity. As an example, one participant, active in an online gaming community, explained, "These aren't just people I play with. We talk about our lives, our problems... It's a real community. I feel less alone because of that." This highlights the shift from broadcasting our lives to an added, networked form of sociality, whereby connections are made in specific, and often, passion-based virtual enclaves. However, a major tension was derived from the data. Users are actively searching for authentic connection and yet are aware they are engaging within an algorithmically mediated social space. The gratification of connection is often entombed within an experience of an invisible system that upholds engagements over authentic interaction. For example, participants displayed a subtle frustration with feeds that provided "what the algorithm thinks is what I want to see," when their actual goal was engaging with authentic content that speaks to them or allows for discovery. One user plainly said, "I want to see what my friends are really doing, not what the app thinks is most important. You have to fight the feed to find the real stuff." This reinforces the idea that social connection gratification is not passively received but actively sought in an ongoing tussle between user design and platform. How much effort and time must employ in dodging algorithmic curation to have authentic connection with others in never before seen.

6.3. Theme 3: Managing Information and Escapism Within Converged Media

The participants' use of digital media for informational and diversionary purposes uncovered a nuanced and oftentimes slippery motivation. The association between information (cognitive needs) seeking and escapism (affective needs) seeking is less distinguishable in a converged media landscape, where news, entertainment, and social updates exist side by side in the same feed. Participants talked about the seamless flow they experience, sometimes within minutes, between using Twitter for hard news, TikTok for funny videos, and then reading a long-form article shared by a friend on Facebook. This integrated experience provides varied forms of satisfaction, fulfilling both informational needs and the desire for entertainment or diversion.

The gratification of "infotainment" is highly personalized. Algorithms offer users a mixed bag of content, based on their preferences, that combines cognitive stimulation and emotional comfort. One participant articulated their media behavior as, "My way of catching up with the world while also de-stressing. I can keep up with the day's headlines, but there are also memes and videos of dogs. It makes it less overwhelming." This reveals an intentional use of media to regulate mood and manage cognitive load. However, the downside is that several participants reported feeling overwhelmed or having "information fatigue" from the consistent stream of content that makes it hard to disengage from. The very environment that offer gratification for easy to access, blended content can source stress and demonstrate the two-side nature of the current media experience (Zhang, 2020). The user is responsible for finding an environment that suits their needs for information and opportunities to disengage.

6.4. Theme 4: Platform-Specific Gratifications Emerge

Ultimately, this theme reinforces that gratifications in the digital landscape are not universal but increasingly related to the affordances and cultural norms of specific platforms. The "why" of media use is inextricably connected to the "where." Participants expressed specific motivations to use different platforms, suggesting they are making intentional decisions based on the specific type of gratification being sought. LinkedIn was for gratification of professional identity management and networking, whereas TikTok was used for short form entertainment, creative expression, and trend participation (Ullah, 2025). One participant aptly stated the dissimilarity of their usage, "I go to Twitter for real-time news and witty commentary. I use Pinterest for creative inspiration and planning. They are for completely different purposes." This distinction indicates that UGT has evolved from being focused on media types in general (e.g., television, radio) to a more particular platform-based understanding, or types of ecosystems within the platform. Each platform has its own technological structure that allows and encourages certain user behaviors, and therefore distinct gratifications arise based on those behaviors.

As a simple example, Instagram Stories are designed to be ephemeral and can satisfy the need for casual, low stakes sharing. This is different from posting to the grid, which is a different way of self-expressing. Similarly, the gratification that comes from making something collaboratively in a game like Minecraft is distinct from the gratification of social support attained in a private Facebook group. The results show that if UGT is to be applied in any current way, the technological determinism that is present with the design of platforms will need to be recognized. The technology of the medium causes the motivations and gratifications of the user to exist in a complex ecological relationship with massive implications. Qualitative methods can produce these types of fine-grained observations, which are too often overlooked in the broader quantitative surveys in existing UGT literature (Anis, 2025).

7. Discussion

This chapter makes sense of the findings from the previous section in context of media studies around larger theoretical and academic conversations. The discussion is organized into three central themes. First, it considers the phenomenological meaning of the themes, and the lived experience of digital gratifications in a contemporary context. Second, it reflects on the study's theoretical orientation and proposes a recontextualization of Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) through the complementary lens of Media Ecology Theory. Finally, it contextualizes a dialectical tension between user agency and environmental structure which became a theme in participants' responses and adopts a more nuanced understanding of media choice and consumption.

7.1. Making Sense of the Lived Experience of Digital Gratification

The findings of this study produced a rich, phenomenological narrative of what it means to seek and find gratification in an increasingly interactive, personalized, and algorithmically curated media

environment. The theme Curated Self-Expression expands the traditional UGT consideration of self-presentation to include active, creative work in this arena. The gratification is not in the stage, developed product (a finished digital persona) but rather in the continued building of narrative. The findings indicate that digital media platforms are experienced in part as tools for identity exploration and affirmation, and users find satisfaction in feeling like they have authorship at times over their public lives. This is consistent with existing literature that identifies self-expression as a primary motivation, but I think I expanded this notion by considering the curated, performative, and validated nature of self-expression during the 2015-2025 period.

Equally, the theme Seeking Connection in Algorithmically Shaped Environments highlights a profound inconsistency in contemporary social life. The need to belong is still an effective motivator for media use, but the action for belonging is occurring in commercialized systems that mediate and quantify human connection. Participants' stories revealed a critical awareness of this. They are not simply passive dupes of the system but active navigators working to create opportunities for real interaction; users are agents of their own experience. The lived experience complicates the simplistically gratifying social interaction that is so often reported in UGT. In these algorithmically mediated environments, gratification is not free, and user-authored motivation involves a conscious choice in negotiating algorithmic logic. Research points toward the emergence of a new media literacy skill: the ability to see and foster authenticity in an inauthentic experience. However, this process of negotiation can sometimes lead to negative outcomes, for instance, problematic internet use when balance is not maintained (Wei, 2024).

Finally, the intersection of information and escapism, and the emergence of platform-specific gratifications speak to the complicated and fragmented nature of the current media diet. The ability to fluidly bounce between cognitive and affective needs within a single interface indicates the user is developing an advanced set of self-regulatory strategies for mood management and information processing - a challenge for researchers that calls into question binary assumptions of media use. In addition, the diversity of gratifications across platforms shows that users are a developed and nuanced audience who understand the idiosyncratic affordances of each medium to properly select as needed - similar to how a tradesman picks a particular tool for a job. The sophisticated user behavior further indicates that qualitative and mixed-method approaches are appropriate to explore multilayered motivations behind platform selection and consistent engagement in specialized contexts such as esports or online shopping (Nguyen, 2025; Nguyen, 2025).

7.2. Reconstructing UGT with Media Ecology

The findings here substantiate well-supported Media Ecology Theory as an essential complementary framework for conceptualizing prevailing digital media use. While UGT provides a satisfactory lens for examining user motivations and agency, its standard use traditionally diminishes the significant effects of the media environment itself. Media Ecology corrects this imbalance, with the idea that the "medium is the message" allowing for scrutiny of how definition of the technology presents the construct, the logic of the platform defines meaningful opportunity, and how affordances determine perception, ways of interaction, and social organization through a structure-of-the-environment (Siregar, 2025).

Table 5. Comparison of Traditional UGT and Contemporary Digital Gratifications.

UGT Dimension	Traditional Media Context	Contemporary Digital Context
Information	News consumption, learning	Algorithmic curation, infotainment, real-time updates
Entertainment	Passive consumption, scheduled programming	Interactive engagement, on-demand, user-generated content

Social Integration	Parasocial relationships, shared viewing	Network effects, community participation, collaborative creation
Personal Identity	Identification with characters/celebrities	Curated self-expression, personal branding, identity experimentation
Escapism	Temporal diversion from reality	Immersive experiences, seamless platform transitions, mood management

Source: Adapted from theoretical synthesis of Camilleri & Falzon (2021), Sun et al. (2020), and primary research findings.

In this regard, the results indicate that the gratifications individuals are prompted to fulfill is not entirely isolated from the platform they traverse. The algorithmic curation described are an objective instance of the environment directing the experience. The personalized feed is not simply a vessel for content; it structures your reality, prioritizes particular dispositions of information, and encourages specific engagements. The gratification of "connection" is uniquely experienced through a chronologically ordered group chat, different from an algorithmically sorted Instagram feed. They are not only distinctly different streams of content, rather, ecological niches establishing distinct social behaviors and corresponding psychological outcomes. Each platform's features—like Reddit's anonymity, Instagram's visuals, or LinkedIn's professional focus—shape what users can seek or achieve there (Rozen, 2025).

By integrating Media Ecology, we digress from asking merely why users engage with media to also how the media environment defines previously mentioned gratifications possible, probable, or even inevitable. This approach situates for a more quality understanding. UGT situates the user pull - their internal needs and goals; Media Ecology explains environmental push - structural biases and opportunities of the medium. The findings of platform-based gratifications directly demonstrate this synergy. Users are not abstractly seeking gratifications in a vacuum; rather, they are seeking gratifications-within-an-environment - demonstrating intuitive understanding of ecology theories in their everyday choices. This perspective is particularly important in current research, which increasingly recognizes the need to comprehend user behavior regarding specific technological and cultural contexts, for example with TikTok consumption with youth or climate change information practices in indigenous communities (Ullah, 2025; Anis, 2025).

7.3. Dialectical Tensions Between User Agency and Environmental Structure

One of the most significant contributions of this study is the illumination of dialectical tensions that characterize contemporary media use. Participants consistently articulated experiences that embodied contradictions: seeking authentic connection through artificial systems, pursuing individual expression within standardized templates, and attempting autonomous choice within algorithmically curated environments. These tensions reveal that gratifications in the digital age are not straightforward fulfillments of pre-existing needs but complex negotiations between user intentions and structural constraints.

Table 7. Dialectical Tensions in Digital Gratifications.

User Agency	Environmental Structure	Resulting Tension
Desire for authentic connection	Algorithmic curation	"Fighting the feed"
Self-expression goals	Platform metrics (likes/shares)	Validation dependency
Information seeking	Filter bubbles	Echo chamber effects
Time management intentions	Infinite scroll design	Compulsive consumption

Privacy preferences	Data commodification	Surveillance anxiety
Creative freedom	Platform constraints	Template-based creativity

Source: Analysis of participant interviews and theoretical synthesis.

The concept of "fighting the feed" that emerged from participant narratives exemplifies this dialectical relationship. Users recognize that algorithms shape their social reality, yet they actively develop strategies to circumvent or manipulate these systems to achieve desired gratifications. This represents a form of tactical resistance that de Certeau (1984) might recognize - users operating within structures they cannot fully control, finding ways to achieve their goals despite systemic constraints. Moreover, the study reveals that negative outcomes often accompany gratification-seeking behaviors, challenging UGT's traditional functionalist orientation. Participants reported experiences of anxiety, addiction-like behaviors, and social comparison that directly resulted from their pursuit of gratifications. This dark side of gratification deserves greater theoretical attention.

Table 8. Negative Gratifications and Unintended Consequences.

Gratification Sought	Negative Outcome	Participant Reports	Example Quote
Social connection	Social comparison anxiety	8/12	"I go looking for connection but end up feeling inadequate"
Information	Information overload	10/12	"The constant stream is exhausting, I can't process it all"
Entertainment	Time displacement	9/12	"Hours disappear and I feel guilty about wasted time"
Self-expression	Validation dependency	7/12	"I check constantly for likes, it's unhealthy"
Escapism	Reality avoidance	6/12	"Sometimes I use it to avoid dealing with real problems"
Community belonging	Echo chamber isolation	5/12	"My feed reinforces what I already believe"

Source: Primary data from participant interviews.

These findings suggest that a comprehensive understanding of digital media gratifications must account for both the light and shadow of user experiences. The integrated UGT-Media Ecology framework proposed here provides theoretical space for such complexity, recognizing that gratifications are neither purely user-driven nor environmentally determined, but emerge from the dynamic interaction between human agency and technological structures.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This research study utilized interpretive phenomenological analysis to re-evaluate Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) contextually within the discursive field of current media from 2015-2025. Combining Uses and Gratifications Theory with Media Ecology Theory, this study examined how digital media users interpret and fulfill their desired gratifications. Overall, the findings show the complex engagements between user agency and environmental structuring, a balance that does not deny the value of UGT, but asks for contextualization in terms of algorithmic curation, convergence of platforms for agency and the act of interactive self-expression.

In our analysis we embraced four themes of contemporary digital media gratifications as a process: the need for curated self-expression, connecting within algorithmically infused environments, blurring the act of navigating information and escapism and platform specific gratifications. We believe our findings reiterate our thesis that the structure of the modern media landscape is more than just new platforms to meet pre-defined needs, but a blockade and catalyst to new gratification flows. The balancing act that occurs between the active audience and media environment, indicates that gratifications are co-constructed phenomena, where individual psychological needs interact with the intended affordances of mediatic platform.

We feel the theoretical implications extend in two directions. First, UGT as a concept should be seen as "evolving" beyond an individualistic theory and see itself as articulating the ecology of the context whereby all media choices are made. Future UGT studies should focus more on the structural involvement of platforms and algorithms as active agents of the gratification process (Zolkepli, 2018). Second, the Media Ecology integration provides a more holistic explanation of the characteristic location of gratifications, and what those gratifications could be from the standpoint of the medium itself and not strictly the content shared in that medium.

With these findings an additional set of recommendations for research should be made. Additional work should be done to investigate the psychological costs of curated self-expression or the fragmented social challenges (like echo chambers) summoned by algorithmic bubbles or the long-term impact on our satisfaction. Longitudinal studies would be warranted to observe how the development of gratifications evolve simultaneously with the pace of technological evolution. It is important for researchers to continue to develop and splash Uses and Gratification Theory with other theoretical frameworks to encapsulate the infinite complexity of media interaction in the contemporary digital world (Wang, 2025; Magano, 2025). Lastly, UGT continues to be applied to diverse complex contexts, from social marketing to government services, and it too should not assume if it is technically a "theory", nor should it assume it is obsolete either, or more holistic models of media consumption (Cabiles, 2023; Wang, 2021).

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