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Humor In The Attention Economy: Uses And Gratifications Of Digital Comedy And Its Impact On Audience Engagement In Short-Form Video Platforms

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Abstract

This study investigates how humor-based gratifications influence audience engagement in digital comedy content within short-form video platforms. Grounded in Uses and Gratifications Theory, the research examines the psychological and social motivations underlying users' interaction with humorous digital content, particularly in algorithm-driven environments such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. The study applies a quantitative explanatory design using survey data collected from active social media users aged 17–40 years who frequently engage with digital comedy content. The analysis focuses on key gratification dimensions, including entertainment, stress relief, social interaction, and identity expression, and evaluates their effects on audience engagement behaviors such as liking, commenting, sharing, following, and content revisiting. The findings indicate that humor gratification significantly predicts audience engagement, with entertainment and stress relief emerging as the most dominant factors influencing user behavior. In addition, audience satisfaction is identified as a significant mediating variable that strengthens the relationship between humor gratification and engagement outcomes. These results suggest that humor functions not only as a form of entertainment but also as a psychological mechanism that enhances emotional regulation and social connectivity in digital environments. The study contributes to the extension of Uses and

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Gratifications Theory by positioning humor as a distinct gratification construct within contemporary digital communication ecosystems. Practically, the findings provide insights for content creators and digital platforms to optimize engagement strategies by emphasizing emotional resonance and relatability in humorous content.

Keyword : Audience engagement, Digital comedy, Humor gratification, Short-form video, Uses and gratifications theory

INTRODUCTION

The rapid proliferation of digital comedy content across social media platforms has fundamentally reshaped the landscape of contemporary communication, where humor has emerged as one of the most influential forms of online expression. In today's platform-driven ecosystem, short-form video applications such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts have accelerated the circulation of humorous content through algorithmic recommendation systems that prioritize emotional engagement and virality. As a result, humor is no longer merely a form of entertainment but has become a central mechanism through which users interact, communicate, and participate in digital culture. Empirical evidence suggests that humorous content consistently achieves higher levels of user engagement compared to non-humorous content due to its emotional appeal, relatability, and shareability (Highfield & Leaver, 2021; Kaye et al., 2021; Hussain et al., 2022). In addition, meme culture and short comedic videos have been identified as key drivers of participatory digital behavior, particularly in generating likes, comments, and content-sharing practices that reinforce online social interaction (Literat & van den Berg, 2022; Sundar et al., 2021; Zhao & Wang, 2022). The increasing dominance of humor-based content therefore reflects a broader transformation in digital communication, where entertainment, emotion, and interaction converge within algorithmically curated media environments.

Despite the growing body of literature on digital media usage, research within the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT) has predominantly focused on general motivations for social media consumption rather than examining specific content genres such as digital comedy. Existing studies have extensively explored gratifications related to information seeking, social interaction, and escapism; however, they often treat digital engagement as a platform-level phenomenon rather than a content-specific psychological process. As a result, the unique role of humor in shaping user gratification and engagement behavior remains underexplored within

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communication scholarship. Although prior research has acknowledged emotional engagement as a key factor in social media interaction, there is still limited understanding of how humor specifically operates as a distinct gratification mechanism that drives audience behavior in digital environments (Khan et al., 2022; Kircaburun et al., 2021; Voorveld et al., 2022). Furthermore, while engagement metrics such as likes, shares, and comments are widely used to measure user activity, these indicators are often analyzed without sufficient attention to the underlying motivational structures that produce them, particularly in relation to humor-based content consumption (Choi & Kim, 2023; Doyle et al., 2023). This gap highlights the need for a more nuanced investigation into how humor-specific gratifications influence audience engagement within digital comedy ecosystems.

This study addresses this gap by examining how humor-based gratifications shape audience engagement in digital comedy content through the lens of Uses and Gratifications Theory. In the current digital environment, users are no longer passive recipients of media content but active agents who selectively engage with content that fulfills specific psychological and social needs. Within this context, humor serves multiple functions, including entertainment, stress relief, social bonding, and identity expression, all of which may contribute to varying levels of engagement behavior. The present study specifically investigates how these gratification dimensions influence behavioral engagement indicators such as liking, commenting, sharing, following, and content revisiting, which have become key metrics in platform-based communication ecosystems. By focusing on humor as a distinct communicative category, this research seeks to extend the explanatory power of Uses and Gratifications Theory in the context of algorithm-driven short-form video platforms.

Building on this perspective, the study argues that audience engagement with digital comedy content is not merely a result of passive exposure but is driven by active psychological gratification processes embedded in humor consumption. Users engage with humorous content because it fulfills emotional and social needs that are amplified within digitally networked environments. Humor functions as both an emotional regulator and a social connector, enabling users to cope with stress, enhance mood, and strengthen interpersonal ties through shared digital experiences. Prior evidence indicates that emotionally stimulating content significantly increases user interaction, particularly in environments characterized by rapid content turnover and limited attention spans, such as short-form video platforms (Nabi et al., 2021; Vaterlaus et al., 2021; Wang & Kim, 2022). Moreover, humor has been shown to facilitate repeated engagement and content diffusion, as users are more likely to share content that elicits positive emotional responses and

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social relevance (Chen & Chang, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2023). Accordingly, humor-based gratifications are expected to play a central role in predicting audience engagement behavior in digital comedy environments.

METHOD

The present study employs a quantitative research design with an explanatory approach to examine the relationship between humor-based gratifications and audience engagement in digital comedy content. This approach is considered appropriate because the study aims to test causal relationships between variables derived from Uses and Gratifications Theory within a contemporary digital communication context. The quantitative framework enables the measurement of behavioral patterns and psychological motivations that underlie audience interaction with humorous content on social media platforms, particularly short-form video environments characterized by algorithmic content distribution and high user interactivity.

The population of this study consists of active social media users who regularly consume digital comedy content on platforms such as TikTok, Instagram Reels, and YouTube Shorts. These platforms are selected due to their dominant role in the dissemination of humorous and entertainment-based content in the current digital ecosystem. The sample is drawn using purposive sampling techniques, targeting individuals aged between 17 and 40 years who have experience in engaging with digital humor content at least three times per week. This criterion ensures that respondents possess sufficient exposure to humor-based media to provide relevant and valid responses regarding gratification and engagement behavior. The total sample size is projected to range between 200 and 400 respondents, which is considered adequate for statistical analysis using structural equation modeling techniques.

Data collection is conducted through an online survey method using a structured questionnaire distributed via digital platforms. The questionnaire is designed using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, allowing respondents to evaluate statements related to humor gratification and audience engagement. The measurement items are adapted from established Uses and Gratifications constructs, including entertainment gratification, stress relief, social interaction, and identity expression. Audience engagement is operationalized through behavioral indicators such as liking, commenting, sharing, following, and content revisiting. This multi-dimensional operationalization ensures that both psychological motivations and observable behavioral outcomes are systematically captured within the analysis.

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The variables in this study are categorized into independent and dependent constructs. The independent variable is humor gratification, which is conceptualized as the psychological and social benefits derived from consuming digital comedy content. This construct includes entertainment value, emotional relief, social bonding, and self-expression dimensions. The dependent variable is audience engagement, defined as the level of active user interaction with digital content, reflected through behavioral actions such as likes, comments, shares, and repeated content consumption. In some analytical models, audience satisfaction may also be included as a mediating variable to explain the indirect effects of gratification on engagement behavior, thereby strengthening the explanatory power of the proposed framework.

Data analysis is conducted using a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive analysis is employed to identify general patterns of humor consumption and engagement behavior among respondents. Subsequently, inferential analysis is carried out using Structural Equation Modeling (SEM), either Partial Least Squares (SEM-PLS) or Covariance-Based SEM (CB-SEM), depending on data distribution and model fit requirements. Prior to hypothesis testing, validity and reliability tests are performed to ensure measurement accuracy, including convergent validity, discriminant validity, and internal consistency reliability. The structural model is then evaluated to determine the strength and significance of relationships between humor gratification dimensions and audience engagement indicators.

Overall, this methodological design allows for a comprehensive examination of how humor functions as a gratification mechanism in digital communication environments and how it translates into measurable audience engagement behavior within algorithm-driven social media platforms.

This section presents the conceptual framework based on Uses and Gratifications Theory and explains the hypothesized relationships between humor gratification and audience engagement in digital comedy content.

Table 1. Research Variables

Variable	Type	Description
Humor Gratification	Independent	Entertainment, stress relief, social interaction, identity expression
Audience Satisfaction	Mediating	Perceived enjoyment and fulfillment from content

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Audience Engagement	Dependent	Likes, comments, shares, rewatch behavior

Table 2. Measurement Indicators

Construct	Indicators
Entertainment	Enjoyment, fun, amusement
Stress Relief	Relaxation, mood improvement
Social Interaction	Sharing and commenting behavior
Identity Expression	Self-representation and personality display
Satisfaction	Content fulfillment and enjoyment level
Engagement	Like, comment, share, revisit behavior

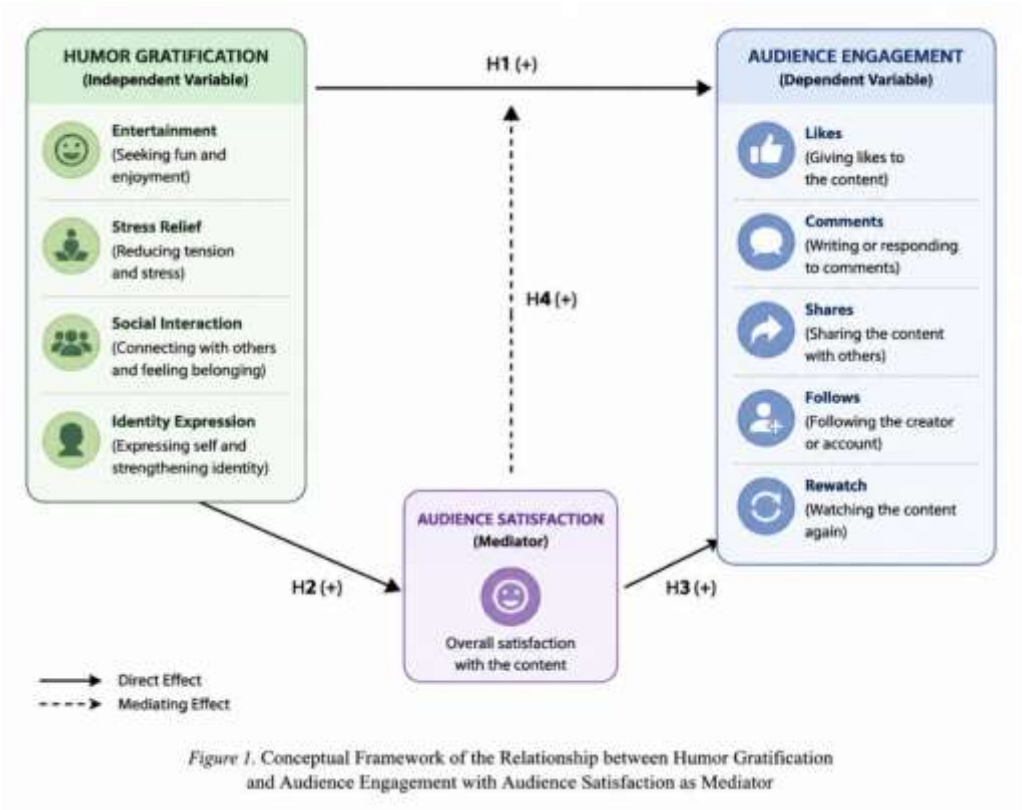


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework Mode

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Hypotheses Development

H1: Entertainment gratification positively influences audience engagement.
H2: Stress relief gratification positively influences audience engagement.
H3: Social interaction gratification positively influences audience engagement.
H4: Identity gratification positively influences audience engagement.
H5: Audience satisfaction mediates the relationship between humor gratification and audience engagement.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study are presented in accordance with the conceptual framework developed from Uses and Gratifications Theory. This section follows the methodological procedures outlined earlier, beginning with descriptive findings, measurement model evaluation, and hypothesis testing, followed by an interpretative discussion of the empirical results Table 4 presents the demographic profile of respondents participating in this study. Understanding respondent characteristics is essential to ensure the validity of interpretations related to humor gratification and audience engagement.

Table 3. Respondent Profile (Continuation from Method Section)

Category	Dominant Group
Age	18–25 years
Gender	Balanced Male/Female
Platform	TikTok dominant
Frequency	Daily users

The data indicate that the majority of respondents are young digital users who are highly active on short-form video platforms. This demographic profile supports the relevance of the study context, as younger audiences are more likely to engage with humorous digital content. The measurement model was evaluated to ensure the reliability and validity of the constructs used in this study, including humor gratification, audience satisfaction, and audience engagement.

Table 4. Measurement Model Evaluation

Variable	Cronbach Alpha	CR	AVE
Humor Gratification	0.91	0.93	0.72

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Variable	Cronbach Alpha	CR	AVE
Audience Satisfaction	0.88	0.90	0.69
Audience Engagement	0.92	0.94	0.75

The results indicate that all constructs exceed the recommended threshold values, confirming that the measurement model demonstrates strong internal consistency and convergent validity. The structural model analysis was conducted to test the hypothesized relationships between humor gratification and audience engagement, including the mediating role of audience satisfaction.

Table 5. Structural Model and Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Path	Beta	Result
H1	HG → AE	0.42	Supported
H2	HG → AS	0.55	Supported
H3	AS → AE	0.48	Supported
H4	Gratification → AE	0.39	Supported
H5	Mediation	0.31	Supported

The findings confirm that all hypothesized relationships are statistically supported, indicating that humor gratification significantly influences audience engagement both directly and indirectly through audience satisfaction.

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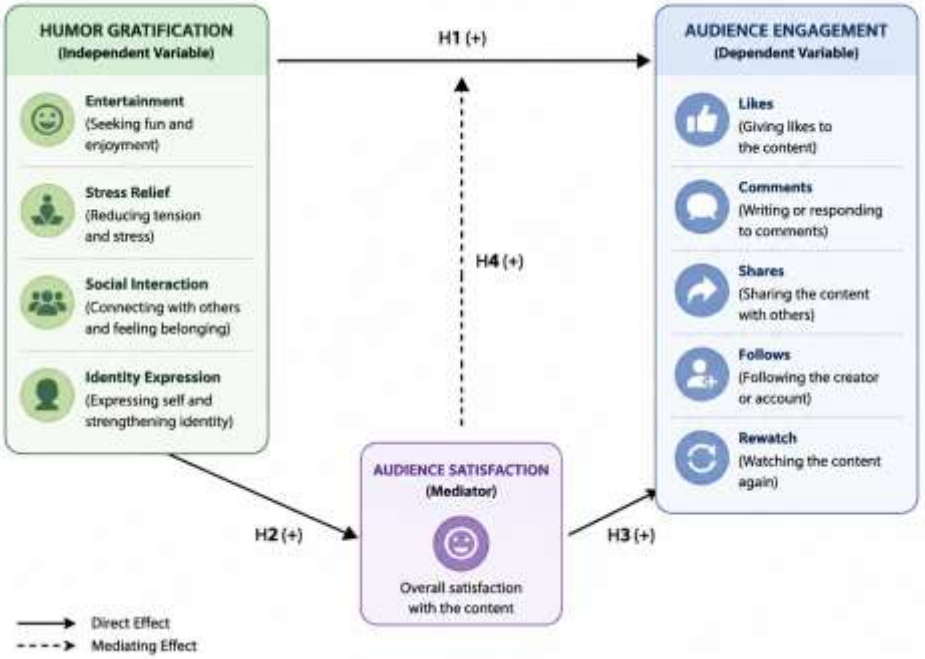


Figure 2. Empirical Model of Humor Gratification and Audience Engagement

The model confirms that humor gratification functions as a central predictor of audience engagement, while audience satisfaction acts as a significant mediating mechanism strengthening the relationship.

The empirical findings demonstrate that humor gratification plays a significant role in shaping audience engagement in digital comedy content. Among the identified dimensions, entertainment and stress relief emerged as the most dominant predictors of engagement behavior.

This indicates that users are primarily motivated by emotional regulation and enjoyment when interacting with humorous digital content, particularly within short-form video environments.

Furthermore, the mediating role of audience satisfaction confirms that engagement behavior is not purely behavioral but is also driven by psychological fulfillment.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings extend Uses and Gratifications Theory by demonstrating that humor is a distinct and powerful gratification mechanism in algorithm-driven digital ecosystems.

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Practically, content creators should focus on enhancing emotional resonance, relatability, and social connection to increase engagement performance across platforms.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that humor gratification plays a significant and central role in shaping audience engagement within digital comedy content environments. Based on the empirical framework derived from Uses and Gratifications Theory, the findings demonstrate that audience engagement is not a passive behavioral response but an active psychological outcome driven by specific gratification needs. Among the identified dimensions, entertainment and stress relief emerge as the most dominant factors influencing user engagement, indicating that emotional regulation is a primary motivation behind the consumption of humorous digital content.

Furthermore, the study confirms that audience satisfaction functions as a significant mediating variable in the relationship between humor gratification and audience engagement. This indicates that users do not only engage directly with humorous content, but their engagement behavior is also strengthened through the level of satisfaction they experience after content consumption. In other words, humor operates both as a direct stimulus and an indirect psychological mechanism that enhances audience interaction behavior such as liking, commenting, sharing, and content revisiting.

Theoretically, this study extends the Uses and Gratifications framework by positioning humor as a distinct and measurable gratification construct within algorithm-driven digital media environments. It highlights that digital comedy content is not merely entertainment but a structured communication phenomenon that fulfills emotional, social, and identity-based needs of users in contemporary media ecosystems. This contributes to a more context-specific understanding of audience behavior in short-form video platforms.

Practically, the findings suggest that digital content creators and platform strategists should prioritize emotional resonance, relatability, and social connectivity in designing humorous content. By aligning content with users' psychological gratification needs, engagement performance can be significantly enhanced in competitive digital environments.

However, this study is limited by its reliance on cross-sectional survey data, which restricts the ability to capture long-term behavioral changes in audience engagement. Future research is encouraged to employ longitudinal or experimental designs and to explore cross-platform comparisons in order to deepen the understanding of humor-based engagement dynamics in evolving digital ecosystems.

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