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Social Media Affordances and Social Validation Among Nigerian Youths: An Examination of Self-Presentation and Online Engagement

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Abstract

This study examined how perceived social media affordances, self-presentation, and online engagement collectively shape experiences of social validation among Nigerian youths within an integrated framework that combines Affordance theory, Goffman's Dramaturgical perspectives, and Uses and Gratifications. Using a quantitative survey of 480 active social media users across platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, and X), data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlations, regression, and regression-based sequential mediation modelling. Our findings indicate that perceived social media affordances significantly predict self-presentation behaviours ($\beta = 0.79$, $p < 0.001$), self-presentation significantly predicts online engagement ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$); and online engagement predicts perceived social validation ($\beta = 051$, $p < 0.001$). Our findings also reveal that self-presentation and online engagement jointly and sequentially mediate the relationship between perceived affordances and perceived social media validation, with a significant indirect effect ($\beta = 0.13$, 95% CI [0.09, 0.19]) and a non-significant direct path from affordances to validation. Within a connectivity-constrained environment of Nigerian youths, our findings support a process-based understanding of digital interaction, showing how technological affordances are translated into social outcomes via structured, theoretically grounded user practices. Apart from validation emerging as a salient gratification, the study noted other motivational cues (sociability, identity expression, and information seeking) behind youth engagement with social media, suggesting that validation is just one of many reasons underlying youth social media use. The study contributes to Global Majority Media scholarship by providing a theoretically integrated process-based framework and a mechanism-oriented narrative of social media use in a non-Western setting.

Keywords: affordance theory; mediated communication; Nigerian youths; online engagement; self-presentation; social validation

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1. Introduction

The digital and mobile internet revolution has continued to shape how digital nativesor young people, communicate, seek expression, and consume content in digital spaces. Globally, young people account for more than 60% of social media platform users, and

they continue to exhibit high levels of technological adaptability and consumption patterns (Nwafor et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2024). In Africa, particularly in Nigeria, the youth extensively use social media as a tool for entertainment, political participation, identity construction, peer interaction, social comparison, and validation (Bhanye et al., 2023; Adjin-Tetty & Yeboah-Benin, 2025). Given their fluid and interactive nature, users leverage the affordances of social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, X (formerly Twitter)) to curate self-presentation (Zhang & Zhang, 2025; Hjetland et al., 2022), engage in social interactions, and evaluate their social worth based on feedback.

In this study, we systematically differentiate among three related but conceptually distinct phases of youths' social media use. Firstly, social media affordances are viewed as perceived action potentials (such as visibility, editability, interactivity, and persistence) that influence what is technologically feasible in a given platform environment (Lane et al., 2023; Vaast & Kaganer, 2013; Gibson, 1977). Secondly, self-presentation and online engagement are conceived as sociability practices that explain how youths selectively and strategically utilise these potentials to curate their identities and interact with others. Thirdly, social validation denotes the socio-psychological outcomes of sociability practices (e.g., youths' biased sense of being recognised, approved of, or valued by their online audiences). These explicitly distinguish three analytical levels: structural (platform-level design possibilities representing affordances), behavioural (engagement represents users' practices), and outcome (social feedback, a consequence of social validation).

Within the online milieu, social media affordances are conceptualised as the possibilities for action enabled by platform features such as likes, comments, shares, stories, visibility settings, and editing tools (Ronzhyn et al., 2023; Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023; Dvir-Gvirsman, 2023). These features facilitate or constrain user behaviour and empower individuals to selectively present aspects of their identities, a process known as self-presentation (Srivastava & Nayak, 2025; Brown et al., 2022; Conle & Dyke, 2004). Through the attention metrics and feedback mechanisms of several platforms, the youth also leverage these affordances to present themselves or engage with peers. When youths interact online, they seek acknowledgement and approval, which in various contexts translates into feelings of validation and social recognition.

There is a growing reliance on digital validation as a significant feature of online engagement and practices. Nevertheless, this desire to pursue approval and validation on online platforms has both positive and negative mental effects, ranging from enhanced confidence, greater social capital, and stronger connections to perceived low self-esteem, anxiety, and identity confusion. Both disinformation and misinformation constitute adverse outcomes of an over-reliance on and consistent desire for digital recognition. A number of these positive and negative outcomes have been documented worldwide and are generally redefining young people's social construction, identity presentation, and well-being in both online and offline digital spaces (Marciano et al., 2024; Gungor, 2023; Zsila & Reyes, 2023; Keum et al., 2022).

In Nigeria, scholarship on social media penetration, usage, and digital culture among youths is extensive. However, several studies that have explored Nigerian youths' use of social media focus more on their political and activist participation, entrepreneurship, education, the promotion of reading culture, and online/digital marketing (Ciroma et al., 2025; Akaerele-popoola et al., 2022; Nwafor & Muoboghare, 2022; Uzuegbunam, 2015). A few studies have explored self-presentation and identity curation, online visibility, and validation (Enyinnaya, 2025; Dunu & Abaneme, 2024; Akor & Odey, 2022; Gever & Okoro, 2020), ignoring how Nigerian youths leverage platform affordances to shape their self-presentation behaviours and how these influence their online engagement and social validation experiences. This creates a gap in the streams of scholarship on Nigerian

youths' digital media culture and consumption regarding peer networks, the utilisation of affordances for social validation, and self-presentation behaviours. To address this gap, an empirical study is needed to explore the intersections and relationships among social media affordances, self-presentation, online engagement, and social validation. Understanding how these constructs intersect broadens the scholarship on youth's digital culture and the socio-psychological implications of social-mediated communication. The purpose of this study is to investigate the relationship among social media affordances, social validation, and self-presentation among Nigerian youths within an integrative framework of Affordance theory, Dramaturgical theory, and Uses and Gratification Theory. The following research questions guide the study:

1. To what extent do perceived social media affordances predict self-presentation behaviours among Nigerian youths?
2. Does perceived social media validation significantly predict self-presentation and online engagement?
3. Does online engagement significantly predict perceived social validation among Nigerian youths?
4. Do self-presentation and online engagement sequentially explain the relationship between social media affordances and social validation?

2. Literature Review

Conceptually, this study revolves around four constructs (social media affordances, social validation, self-presentation and online engagement). Even though these concepts may seem related, we keep them distinct and separate in our analysis to avoid combining platform design, user practices, and outcome into a single undifferentiated category. In the study framework, affordances denote the structural possibilities and constraints ingrained in platforms, self-presentation and online engagement represent patterned sociability practices, and social validation represents the evaluative outcomes of these practices as perceived by Nigerian youths. Separating these concepts enables researchers to trace a process that links what platforms make possible, what youths do with those possibilities, and how they feel valued or recognised in return. Each of these constructs is critically discussed, and a summary of the reviews for each variable or construct is provided in Table 1.

2.1. Social Media Affordances

The concept of affordances was first conceptualised and theorised by Gibson (1977), while Treem and Leonardi (2012) and Vaast and Kaganer (2013) extended it to social media (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). Based on the features of new technologies, Treem and Leonardi (2012) identified four typologies of affordances: visibility, persistence, editability, and association. These affordances have been used to explain the features and technical possibilities of social media platforms that allow users to interact and express themselves online (Kim & Ellison, 2022; Santos & Valenzuela, 2025). Technology affordances can be explained from three related perspectives: Relational and perceptual, enabled and constrained, and action potentials. From a relational perspective, affordances are not exclusively a property of the technology but result from the relationship between the platform's material features and the user's perception and use of the features, which can vary across social contexts. Based on rational perspectives, we therefore do not conceive affordances as static technical features that automatically drive behaviour but as potentials that become more or less prominent depending on users' goals, peer norms, and socio-cultural context. Our focal point is not just about the existence of visibility or editability, but about when, for whom, and under what conditions these affordances appropriately shape youths' self-presentation,

engagement, and validation experiences. The enabled and constrained (control) lens describes affordances as those activities that shape what users can and cannot do within the social (digital) media spaces. This control lens creates a responsive environment for specific actions while limiting others (Ronzhyn et al., 2023; Zhang & Zhang, 2025). The action potentials perspective describes affordances as the possibilities for action that a technology provides understood through the lens of the user.

A synthesis of these definitional perspectives identifies perceived or imagined features of social media platforms that either facilitate or constrain specific user actions; these actions arise from the interactions among technology, users, and context (Ronzhyn et al., 2023). However, beyond being technical features, affordances are "action potentials" created via the relationship between the platform's design and how users perceive and use it (Khan et al., 2019). Platform affordances shape how information is shared and how social interaction occurs (Santos & Valenzuela, 2025; Wang et al., 2024). Based on the context of this study, the visibility affordance component is the ability to make information and actions public and visible to others (e.g., likes, reach, and views), while the identity affordance captures the opportunities for users to develop and present their identity (through profile pictures and listed interests). The editability affordance is expressed through filtering or modifying content (pictures, videos, and captions). In contrast, the affordance of persistence is the ability to store and access content and interactions over time, with varying degrees of archival durability (saved posts, archives) (Treem & Leonardi, 2012; Santos & Valenzuela, 2025).

Empirical studies on social media affordances are extensive, each addressing a specific issue, including the effects of affordances on privacy concerns, impression management concerns, and self-esteem (Marazziti et al., 2025; H. Yang & Zhang, 2022). The results of a study that examined the relationship between affordances and fatigue and its mechanism action using 401 social media users in China revealed that "social media affordances (visibility, persistence, association, and edibility) positively influence technological stress (impression management concerns and privacy concerns) and technological stress positively influences social media fatigue" (H. Yang & Zhang, 2022, p. 102142). Given these discussions, we operationalised the terms in Table 1 below:

Table 1. Explanation and descriptions of variables/constructs.

Variable/Construct	Definition/Description	Examples/Key Points
Social media Affordances (Independent variable)	Perceived and context-dependent possibilities for action provided by platform features. Emphasise perceived possibilities/constraints and the platform-user-context relationship, not behaviour. (Kim & Ellison, 2022)	Interactivity (likes, comments), visibility (profile reach, views), Editability (content control), persistence (lasting posts) Rice et al. (2017), Treem and Leonardi (2012)
Self-presentation (mediating variable A)	Strategic identity work where individuals selectively curate and manage how they appear to others online using those possibilities to shape audiences' impressions. This highlights strategic identity work using those possibilities.	Selective disclosure, image curation, identity management
Online Engagement (Mediating variable B)	Emphasises frequency and intensity of interactive behaviours (posting, commenting, reacting).	Active (posting, liking), Passive (viewing, scrolling), Community participation.
Social Validation (Dependent Variable)	Subjective evaluation of being approved/recognised rather than just counting likes.	Likes, followers, positive comments, popularity, and perceived social worth.
Nigerian Youths (Contextual variable)	Cultural, social, and environmental factors are shaping how Nigerian youths use social media and seek validation.	Peer influence, cultural values (status-seeking, belonging), internet access, and trends.

Based on Table 1, affordances are conceptualised as structural possibilities, self-presentation and engagement are patterned practices, and validation is treated as a socio-psychological outcome of these practices.

2.2. Self-Presentation and Identity Curation on Social Media

Self-presentation in a social media environment is conceptualised as a strategic construction and communication of identity to influence others' perceptions of the self. It is rooted in impression management theory (Nichols, 2020) and involves selective disclosure, content curation, and symbolic representation across social media platforms.

Early scholarship emphasised performative features and identity online, while contemporary social media spaces amplify these processes through affordances (visibility, persistence, editability). Instead of emphasising traditional definitions, this study adopts functional approaches that describe self-presentation as a behavioural mechanism influenced by platform affordances and audience expectations (Muyidi, 2025). In digital environments, users purposively select information to disclose to construct a desired image or curate their identity (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013).

The purpose is to craft a coherent online persona or profile across social media platforms (Hogan, 2010). As cited in Table 1, platform affordances enable self-presentation and identity curation.

Empirical scholarship on self-presentation and identity curation is expansive but largely Western-centric, with relatively few studies conducted in the Nigerian context (Enyinnaya, 2025; Abdullah et al., 2023; Akor & Odey, 2022; Gever & Okoro, 2020), and even fewer focusing on Nigerian youths. Enyinnaya's (2025) qualitative study of Igbo women fashion designers, for example, demonstrates how Instagram's visibility, editability, and association affordances stage market-oriented identity curation in which images, captions, and tags are managed to achieve cultural authenticity while building commercial personae or micro-brands. Akor and Odey's (2022) mixed-methods study of 400 tertiary students indicates that editing and feedback affordances on Facebook can facilitate deceptive curation, with such practices correlating with diminished self-esteem despite validation. Abdullah et al. (2023) surveyed 429 Nigerian Facebook users and found that presentation of the "extended self" and self-expression through platform persistence and connectivity strongly impact identity formation, emphasising "the role of Social Network Site (SNS) in satisfying people's social and communication needs interwoven with identity formation" (Abdullah et al., 2023, p. 710). Further Nigerian studies highlight how platform affordances intersect with self-presentation strategies and social validation.

Gever and Okoro (2020), in a survey of 385 Nigerian Facebook users, report that visibility and sharing affordances boost self-promotion and ingratiation tactics, which in turn enhance responsiveness to political messages. Dunu and Abaneme's (2024) study of young Nigerian female adults on online dating sites documented multiple selves, blending real and enhanced pictures, revealing how both deceitful and genuine self-presentations carry image and reputational implications.

A synthesis of these studies demonstrates that Nigerian users do not fully adopt the Western-oriented self-presentation model; rather, they discuss authenticity, marketability, and social validation within specific cultural and socio-economic contexts where online impressions can have tangible consequences for status, relationships, and opportunities. Research conducted outside Nigeria similarly demo nstrates that a profile can simultaneously reflect real personality and strategic self-presentation, but these studies basically serve as a generic backdrop to the present study. Back et al. (2010) report that Facebook profile content frequently correlates with owners' offline personality, challenging a simple "idealised self" view and indicating that curated profiles carry valid cues about the self. Bullingham and

Vasconcelos (2013) find that online self-presentation frequently involves amplifying existing offline traits while downplaying undesirable aspects, extending Goffman's dramaturgical framework in virtual spaces.

C. Yang et al. (2017) surveyed 337 Taiwan Facebook users and demonstrated that self-presentation motives such as self-expression and social validation positively predict identity-curation behaviours (profile editing and content posting), with perceived audience feedback mediating these effects.

Tewatia and Majumdar (2022) reveal that identity curation on Instagram is driven by authenticity concerns, as users construct idealised yet relatable selves through visual filters and captions. The study also showed significant positive associations between curation intensity and well-being outcomes when perceived as authentic ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$). Gakahu's (2024) semiotic analysis of women politicians' Facebook profiles highlights the role of image composition and cultural symbols in shaping leadership identity through the affordances of visual salience.

2.3. Social Validation and the Visibility Discourse

The social validation literature leans heavily on social psychology, treating validation mainly as an individual outcome (changes in self-esteem). This conceptual frame has been contextualised and extended to different spheres, including computer-mediated communication and online digital spaces (Yan et al., 2021). In digital spaces, social validation is the sense of acceptance, approval, or recognition that individuals receive through online interactions. In the context of this study and social media scholarship, we operationalise social validation as users' subjective sense of being noticed, accepted, or valued that arises from feedback and attention in online interactions. The feedback or attention includes likes, comments, followers, and perceived popularity. Platform affordances (possibilities) are utilised by users to amplify or constrain their feedback as they interact online

The motive behind social validation is to bolster self-esteem and a sense of belonging, which individuals express by sharing personal details or seeking feedback to align with group norms online (Ballara, 2023).

Experimental studies in Western settings show that validation metrics have a substantial psychological impact, triggering social comparison and distress when validation is low and reinforcing posting behaviour when validation is high (Lee et al., 2020; Hegazi et al., 2022; Nesi & Prinstein, 2015). Scharlach and Hallinan (2023) and Milli et al. (2025) added that platform design and algorithmic logic intensify validation asymmetries or "feedback loops". The feedback loops amplify attention, create more visibility, and reinforce inequality in online social capital. By extension, validation is coproduced by the audience, platform affordances, and algorithmic curation, making it a structural resource rather than just a personal reward (Milli et al., 2025; Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023; Treem & Leonardi, 2012). Stapleton et al. (2017) surveyed research that examined the impact of exposure to social media-based social comparison information on self-esteem. Findings reveal that social comparison on Instagram mediated the relationship between contingent self-worth and self-esteem. Also, self-worth approved by others moderates the relationship between the intensity of Instagram use and social comparison on Instagram.

Most social validation research focuses on attention-seeking or promotion cues. However, a recent study by McGowan et al. (2025) extends to attentional avoidance. Although their study explored the attention-bias mechanisms underlying anxiety in response to social media status cues (e.g., follower counts, likes), their results point to the flip side of attention-seeking. The results indicate that social status cues influence the anxiety experienced by youth when viewing an Instagram profile. Highly anxious youth showed attentional avoidance of Instagram status cues (likes, followers). The study also indicated that as

anxiety increased, youth allocated attention more slowly toward these cues. Additionally, profile popularity (high vs. low number of likes/followers) did not affect anxious youth's avoidance behaviour.

Similarly, while social validation contributes to the construction of online identities, a recent literature review study warns of the implications of manipulative or deceptive identity construction, including echo chambers and polarisation that cause tension between seeking attention and maintaining authenticity (Soh et al., 2024; Ballara, 2023; Yufada & Simanjuntak, 2023).

2.4. Online Engagement

Online engagement can be conceptualised in either broad or specific terms. The former term, or broad perspective, denotes the concept as a spectrum of an individual's or brand's behavioural, cognitive, and affective involvement when interacting with its audience on digital platforms, including social media, websites, and other communication apps (Hrincu et al., 2024; Robson, 2018). The latter perspective specifically explains online engagement as active and passive consumption and the creation of digital content by users of different social media platforms (Hayes et al., 2025). This involves how users interact with, react to, and engage with digital content and communities, encompassing activities such as liking, commenting, sharing, creating, and spending time on the platform. The importance of online engagement is to build community, foster loyalty, and create two-way communication.

Online engagement scholarship spans a wide range of domains, including digital marketing, consumer marketing, interpersonal and group communication, professional communication, and social psychology. In these fields, metrics such as likes and shares facilitate attention but affect the emotional meaning of intentions, conflate algorithmic bots with human users, and involve the behavioural, cognitive, and affective involvement of users of digital platforms (Scharlach & Hallinan, 2023). Beyond the descriptions and conceptualisations, this study operationalises engagement as behavioural participation intensity or frequency, and the intensity of interactive behaviours (posting, commenting, reacting).

2.5. Nigerian Youth, Digital Culture, Engagement, and Context

Stripped of legal and other policy definitional dilemmas or complexities, we adopt the National Youth Council of Nigeria (NYCN) definition of youth, which defines youth as individuals between the ages of 18 and 35 years (Punch, 2019; NYCN, 2023; Igbinosa & Saheed, 2024). This categorisation is intentionally designed to accommodate a large population of young adults in Nigeria who are active social media and other digital product users (Statista, 2024). Among this category of young people, Gen Z is most active in digital spaces, consuming, creating, and cocreating digital content. The socio-cultural dynamics of the current dispensation of high-powered digital technologies (Alsaleh, 2024; J. Yang & Zhang, 2023) position digital natives as those who relate to technologies in ways different from those of digital immigrants (Erubami et al., 2021). Nigeria's youth digital culture and participation are characterised by the adoption of social media platforms for a broad range of socio-economic, political, and academic activities (Akaerele-popoola et al., 2022; Awopetu et al., 2024; Uzuegbunam, 2015). Several studies show that young people adopt social media for entertainment, information sharing, and peer networks as well as for micro-entrepreneurship (Shahzady, 2024; Nwolu et al., 2021).

Beyond their high rates of adoption, Nigerian youths' engagement with social media is shaped by factors such as infrastructural constraints, data costs, and evident socio-economic inequality. Factors such as urban–rural inequalities in connectivity, bundle-driven access to mobile networks, and the dominance of a few platforms in the Nigerian digital spaces

influence which affordances are most visible and easily used by Nigerian youths. As youths grapple with high youth unemployment and limited formal opportunities, their perceived popularity and visibility draw both symbolic and material value. These inequalities can be addressed by supporting small-scale entrepreneurship, informal learning, and access to social support.

2.6. Theoretical Foundation

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework that combines Affordance theory (Treem & Leonardi, 2012), Dramaturgical theory, and the Uses and Gratifications perspective (Goffman, 1959; Katz et al., 1973) to explain how social media interactions operate as a structured process linking features, user practices, and social outcome. See Table 2 for their applications and sequential links to the study constructs.

Table 2. Theories and Key Construct and Operationalisation.

Theory	Core Construct	How Does It Explain Links Among Variables	Operational Measures Examples
Affordance Theory (Treem & Leonardi, 2012)	Visibility, persistence, Editability, Association; Algorithmic amplification (Moderator)	* Affordances create objective and perceived potential (e.g., likes visible) that enable social validation, which mediates effects on self-presentation and engagement. • Focuses on the relationship between technological features and user actions. • Affordances represent the possible actions enabled by social media (visibility, editability, interactivity, persistence).	* Trace metrics (likes, shares, comments); perceived affordance. Likert scales; experimental manipulation of feedback visibility; SEM of affordance, validation, and engagement. * Explains how social media affordances shape the way Nigerian youths present themselves and engage online.
Goffman-Presentation of self (Goffman, 1959)	Front-stage vs. Back-stage, Impression management, Props and Scripts	* Explain micro-level strategies of self-presentation that seek validation; temporal affordances affect front/back-stage distinction. • Individuals manage impressions to influence others' perceptions. • Online environments allow selective self-presentation and identity management.	Content coding of performance tactics; Impression management scales; platform segmentation indices (ephemeral vs. permanent posts). Explains how Nigerian youths control their image online to seek social validation (likes, comments, recognition).
Uses and Gratifications (Katz et al., 1973)	Motives: social validation, self-presentation, information, entertainment, and social capital.	Acts as antecedent /mode: motives shape how affordances are used and moderate affordance → validation→ engagement paths. • Users actively choose media to satisfy needs such as self-expression, social interaction, and entertainment. People use media to construct and project a desired self-image. Users leverage the platforms' editable, visible nature to curate personas and achieve the validation they seek.	Social validation: A prominent gratification among others. Youths post, edit, and engage to gain likes, comments, followers, and a sense of being seen. The argument here is that Nigerian youths use the platform's affordances precisely because they gratify a need for social validation and self-presentation. Users actively choose media to satisfy needs such as self-expression, social interaction, and entertainment.

Instead of explaining these theories as parallel perspectives, they are conceptualised as having complementary analytical roles, structured and sequentially linked to clarify the relationships among perceived affordances, self-presentation, online engagement, and social validation. Affordance theory explains the technological foundation of the model by explaining "how" platform features structure "what" kind of communicative actions are technologically possible for users. Goffman's dramaturgical theory explains how users use these possibilities through self-presentation strategies. Similarly, Uses and Gratifications

Theory explains "why" users choose to engage in these practices, thereby emphasising different motivational needs related to social connection. Jointly, these theoretical perspectives provide a multi-level explanation of digital behaviour, connecting platform design, user agency (motivations), and identity performances. within a process-based framework.

2.6.1. Social Media Affordance Theory: Explaining "How"

Treem and Leonardi's (2012) affordance theory offers a comprehensive theoretical framework for understanding how platform features constrain or enable user behaviour in digital environments. Within social media spaces, there are four core affordances (visibility, persistence, editability, and association). In this study, affordances are defined as a range of possible actions (enabling conditions) available to users that structure, but do not fully prescribe, users' practices within specific platform environments. However, affordances do not determine behaviour in a deterministic sense. Instead, their influence relies on users' perceptions, competencies, and socio-cultural settings.

2.6.2. Goffman's Dramaturgical Theory (Presentation of Self Theory): Explaining "What"

The dramaturgical framework sees social engagement as a show in which people deliberately craft impressions in the sight of others. When used in an online setting, it offers a detailed account of how users purposefully create and present personae.

It provides a micro-level narrative of how users intentionally construct and present identities. It is individual-centric and requires integration with a macro-level affordance account to explain how platform features enable or constrain performance. Contemporary studies suggest blending dramaturgy with affordances to clarify why specific presentations receive validation within platform-specific ecologies (Thygesen, 2024; Marwick & Boyd, 2011).

2.6.3. Use and Gratifications Theory: Explaining "Why"

Uses and Gratifications (U&G) theory, proposed by Katz et al. (1973) and expanded by other scholars, posits that media users are active agents who select media to satisfy specific needs. In social media contexts, needs and motivations may include social interaction, entertainment, personal identity, feedback-seeking, and status/approval (Katz et al., 1973). U&G theory provides a useful lens for evaluating the affordances of social media and social validation. This study focuses on "why" users actively use these action possibilities (affordances) offered by technology features to seek gratification. From a broader perspective, U&G users satisfy several gratifications: (i) social validation/status, (ii) identity construction, (iii) social connection (i.e., building and maintaining networks, feeling a sense of community), (iv) entertainment and self-expression (the sharing and receiving feedback). This shows that, in addition to validation-seeking, users engage with social media for a range of motives. Some of the ways in which U&G theory applies to the key constructions of this study are explained in Table 2.

Overall, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding social media interaction as a process connecting different platform features, user practices, and behavioural outcomes. This integrative approach guides the development of the study's conceptual model and hypotheses.

2.7. Process-Based Conceptual Framework

The process-based conceptual framework provides a structured, theory-driven explanation of how social media interactions unfold among Nigerian youth. It conceptualises the study's four constructs (perceived social media affordances, self-presentation, online engagement, and social validation) as sequentially linked stages within a unified interactional process. Though these constructs are conceptually distinct, individuals apply them

in social media spaces as stages in their interactions, as depicted in Figure 1 (Process-Based Conceptual Framework).

Figure 1 is a process-based conceptual framework linking social media affordances, self-presentation, online engagement, and social validation. The first stage of Figure 1 captures the dimensions of perceived social media affordances (visibility, editability, persistence, and association). They represent the technological conditions that shape user action. The second stage is self-presentation, conceptualised as the strategic use of these affordances. The third stage is online engagement, treated as the behavioural enactment of these performances. The final stage is perceived social validation; it represents the outcome of this interactional process. Further explanation of this framework is captured in the hypothesis development section, which helps to deconstruct any conceptual overlap in the study and advance the complementary roles of the constructs, by aligning them to the integrative framework discussed in Section 2.6.

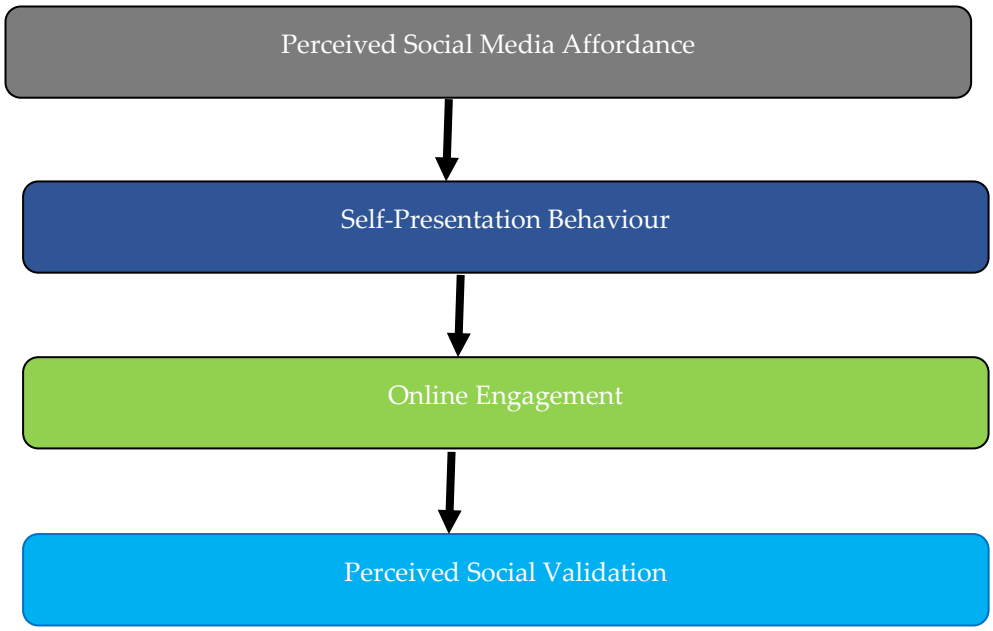


Figure 1. Process-Based Conceptual Framework Linking Social Media Affordances, Self-Presentation, Online Engagement, and Social Validation among Nigerian Youths.

2.8. Hypothesis Development

This study integrates Affordance theory, Uses and Gratifications (U&G) Theory and Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory to explain how youths interact with social media for self-presentation and social validation. These theoretical perspectives function at complementary analytical levels. First, affordance theory explains the technological conditions that enable action, while uses and gratification theory explains the motivations driving user engagement. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory explains how youth strategically construct identities in mediated environments. Taken together, these perspectives offer a process-based narrative that connects platform features, user practices, behavioural engagement, and social outcomes.

2.8.1. Social Media Affordances and Self-Presentation

Affordance theory explains that technological environments structure possible user actions by providing distinct, specific functional possibilities (visibility, persistence, editability, and association). The core argument here is that these affordances do not determine behaviour but shape how users can act within a digital environment. In social media contexts, such features enable users to curate, modify, and selectively disclose personal information.

Based on a dramaturgical lens, individuals actively manage impressions in social interactions. As posited by Goffman (1959), social life can be understood as a performance in which individuals present themselves in ways that align with desired identities on social media platforms. These performances are extended through tools that facilitate controlled self-disclosure and audience management.

Aligned with this perspective, social media affordances create structural conditions that enable strategic self-presentation by extending users' ability to control how others perceive them. Hence, we state thus:

H1. *Perceived social affordances positively predict self-presentation behaviours among Nigerian youths.*

Self-Presentation and Online Engagement

Uses and Gratifications theory suggests that people use media for different purposes, such as self-expression, socialising, and maintaining relationships (Katz et al., 1973). Self-presentation combines expression and engagement, thereby encouraging audience feedback and participation. Purposively, users tend to stay active online in order to maintain visibility and stay socially connected. This ongoing behaviour increases participation online via commenting, sharing, and likes.

Given this background, self-presentation can be understood as a driver of continued platform engagement as users actively participate in a mediated social environment to maintain their constructed identities.

H2. *Self-presentation positively predicts online engagement among Nigerian Youths.*

Online Engagement and Social Validation

In media scholarship, engagement, as espoused in the Uses and Gratifications Theory, is equally motivated by the desire for social rewards, including recognition, approval, and feedback (Katz et al., 1973). Online engagement increases users' visibility and interaction frequently, which in turn enhances opportunities to respond, such as likes, comments, and shares. Though there are several motivations for engagement on social media, validation is appropriately positioned as one of the gratifications that can result from sustained interaction. Engagement, therefore, creates the conditions under which validation can occur by facilitating exposure to create an audience.

Consequently, higher levels of engagement are most likely to increase the possibility of receiving perceived social validation; hence, we state thus:

H3. *Online engagement behaviours positively predict perceived social media validation among Nigerian youths.*

Sequential Mediation of Self-Presentation and Engagement

Based on the preceding arguments, it is understood that affordances provide the technological conditions for action, self-presentation rooted in the strategic use of these affordances (visibility, editability, persistence, association). Engagement is portrayed as sustained behavioural participation, while validation represents a key social outcome.

Therefore, a sequential pathway that analytically distinguishes among features, practices, behaviours, and outcomes helps address concerns about conceptual overlap. Instead of presenting these constructs as parallel dimensions, they conceptualise them as interconnected phases in a wider interactional process. Therefore, we state as follows:

H4. *Self-presentation and online engagement will sequentially mediate the relationship between perceived social media affordances and perceived social validation among Nigerian youths.*

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

A survey research design was employed to examine relationships among perceived social media affordances, self-presentation, online engagement, and social validation. This method enables examination of associative and predictive relationships among constructs without inferring causality. It also helped in understanding the diverse opinions of Nigerian youths (active social media users) regarding the above constructs. Given the choice of survey research design, the pragmatic philosophical paradigm (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019) was adopted. This paradigm suggests that both numerical trends and subjective experiences (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022) are needed to understand the complexities of phenomena (affordances, self-presentation, online engagement, and social validation).

3.2. Population and Sampling Procedure

The study population consisted of Nigerian youths drawn from different regions of the country who are active users of one or more social media platforms. Youth is operationalised here as individuals aged 18–35 years, consistent with the National Youth Council of Nigeria (Igbinosa & Saheed, 2024). This age group has been reported to be active on various social media platforms in Nigeria (Statista, 2024). The adoption of this age bracket helps reduce survey feasibility constraints and ensures conceptual consistency. Respondents were recruited using purposive sampling via online distribution of the questionnaire through Facebook groups, Instagram communities, X discussion forums/spaces, and WhatsApp groups. These social media platforms were selected because they are the most actively used among Nigerian youths. To ensure an even spread across geographic regions, the link to the survey instrument was distributed in at least two youth-focused communities or groups in the North, Southeast, Southwest, and South-south regions. After collating the survey, we obtained 480 valid responses, which represent the study sample.

3.3. Data Collection Methods and Instruments

Data for the study were collected via a survey. The survey instrument, a structured questionnaire, was constructed and adapted for Google Forms and distributed online via social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp). The questionnaire comprised two parts: a demographics section and psychological questions that capture the key constructs (social media affordances, self-presentation, and online engagement) investigated in the study. This section of the instrument is divided into three subsections based on adaptation of validated scales and constructs operationalisation from prior studies: Fox and McEwan's (2017) perceived Social Affordances of Communication Channels Scale (PSACCS model), Michikyan's (2022) self-presentation on Facebook Questionnaire (SPFBQ), and Dessart et al.'s (2015) Social Media Engagement Scale (SMEBS). These validated measurement scales also lend credence to other known scales rooted in computer-mediated communication, psychology, and social media affordances, as shown in Table 3. Questions are worded in a five-point Likert scale of 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = strongly agree. Table 3 below presents the summarised, validated, and adapted scales for measuring each of the key constructs and variables in the study.

Table 3. Validated and Adaptive Measurement Scales and Application.

Variable/Construct	Scale/Source	Authors and Year	Key Dimensions/Items	Sample Items	Adaptation
Social Media Affordances	Perceived Social Affordances of Communication Channels Scale (PSACCS)	Fox and McEwan (2017)	Accessibility, editability, persistence, visibility, anonymity, interactivity, association	"I can easily edit or revise what I post before others see it"	Items reflect visibility, editability, interactivity, persistence, and association
Social media affordances	The perceived social affordances of communication channels scale	Fox and McEwan (2017).	Accessibility, social presence, network association, personalisation, persistence, editability, conversation control, and anonymity.	"I enjoy communicating with others through comments and seven replies"	Items reflect interactivity, personalisation, and conversion control.
Social Media Affordances	Affordances in Social Media Scale	Manata and Spottswood (2021)	Control, visibility, editability, persistence, association	"This platform allows me to control who sees my content"	3–items per-sub-dimension to measure perceived affordances.
Self-presentation	Self-presentation on Facebook Questionnaire (SPFBQ)	Michikyan (2022)	Authentic self, ideal self, false self-presentation	"I try to show the best version of myself on social media"	Wordings adapted from 'Facebook' to 'social media' and targeted Nigerian Youth.
Online engagement self-presentation	Social Media Engagement Behaviour Scale (SMEBS)	Dessart et al. (2015)	Liking, commenting, sharing, and posting frequency	"I regularly comment on others' posts"	Measure engagement and participation behaviour.

3.4. Validity and Reliability Test

Content validity was established: (1) through expert review by communication and media scholars knowledgeable about technology affordances and social psychology, (2) via the adoption of multiple validated integrated scales to capture complementary dimensions of affordances, ensuring construct coverage and improving content validity. Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the reliability of the scales. The values range from 0.88 to 0.0.91 across the four scales, indicating acceptable to good internal consistency, which is above the recommended threshold of 0.70 (Hussey et al., 2025). Table 4 captures the internal consistency of the scales.

Table 4. Internal consistency of scales.

Construct	Cronbach's Alpha
Social media affordances	0.91
Self-presentation	0.86
Online engagement	0.88
Social validation	0.90

Note that values above 0.70 indicate acceptable.

3.5. Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, Pearson's correlations, and regression analysis to examine predictive and associative relationships among the study variables. Mediation effects were explored using hierarchical regression procedures following established mediation guidelines. Descriptive statistics provided insights into respondents' demographics and the distribution of responses. Regression was adopted to test the study's hypotheses derived from the integrated framework comprising the affordances, Uses and Gratifications, and Goffman theories.

4. Results

The analysis of data, results, and their interpretation are presented here. Demographic data are presented first, followed by descriptive analyses of the study's variables (presented in bar charts and tables), Pearson correlations, regression, and regression-based sequential mediation to test the hypotheses.

Table 5 presents the distribution of respondents' demographic characteristics. The gender distribution showed that females slightly outnumbered males, accounting for 51.9%, while males (n = 231) accounted for 48.1% of the respondents. Most respondents are young adults within the primary age groups 18–24 and 25–31, accounting for 45% and 35% of active social media users, respectively, who are more likely to engage with different platforms to seek validation and self-presentation goals. Most respondents were undergraduates (192 or 40%), followed by degree holders (144 or 30%), while 96 (20%) were postgraduate certificate holders. The data also showed that more than two-thirds (340), accounting for 70.8% of respondents, use any social media daily; 87 (18.1%) use platforms several times a week. Twenty-nine (6%) respondents use any of the platforms weekly, while 24 (5%) rarely use any of the platforms. Facebook (174 or 36.3%) remains the most frequently used platform among Nigerian youths, followed by TikTok (130 or 27%), then by Instagram (98 or 20.4%), and X (formerly Twitter) (46), accounting for 9.6%, while 32 were WhatsApp users. These platforms were measured based on their use for social validation and self-representation and may not reflect other activities for which they are used.

Table 5. Distribution of Respondents' Demographic Characteristics (n = 480).

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage
Gender	Male	231	48.1%
	Female	249	51.9
Age	18–24	216	45.0
	25–30	168	35.0
	31–35	96	20
	Total	**480**	**100**
Education	Undergraduate	192	40.0
	Diploma	48	10.0
	Bachelor's Degree	144	30
	Postgraduate	96	20
	Total	**480**	**100**
Social media use	Daily	340	70.8
	Several times a week	87	18.1
	Weekly	29	6.0
	Rarely	24	5.0
	Total	**480**	**100**
Frequently used platform for engagement	Facebook	174	36.3
	TikTok	130	27.0
	Instagram	98	20.4
	X (formerly Twitter)	46	9.6
	Whatsapp	32	6.6
	Total	**480**	**100**

Source: Data analysis.

4.1. Descriptive Statistics on Respondents' Responses to Survey Items

The descriptive statistics for the survey items organised under the five key research questions (RQ1–RQ4) are presented, followed by inferential statistics showing associations among the constructs and their effects on Nigerian youths in digital spaces. Each bar chart shows the mean and standard deviation for Nigerian youths' use of social media affordances to seek social validation, self-present, and engage online. Means above 3 indicate agreement, while higher means indicate stronger agreement. Responses were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = strongly agree). The sample size is 480 respondents (social media users).

Figure 2 is a bar chart showing the mean scores for four key social media affordances (visibility, interactivity, editability, persistence) and their influence on self-presentation behaviours among Nigerian youths. The mean scores, which range from 3.61 to 3.80 on a 5-point scale, indicate generally high engagement with these affordances in users' online self-presentation.

The interactivity component has the highest mean (M = 3.80, SD = 0.71), indicating that respondents frequently interact with others through comments, likes, and shares. Higher scores on visibility items (M = 3.70, SD = 0.73) indicate that youths perceived their post as easily reaching broad audiences, which, in turn, is associated with more strategic self-presentation. The editability (M = 3.63, SD = 0.72) and persistence (M = 3.61, SD = 0.74) means show slightly lower but still positive scores. By editing posts or profiles to improve their online image and increase interaction frequency through likes, shares, and comments, respondents remain visible over time. The chart clearly demonstrates that Nigerian youth find interactivity features most influential for their self-presentation behaviours on social media, with all four affordances.

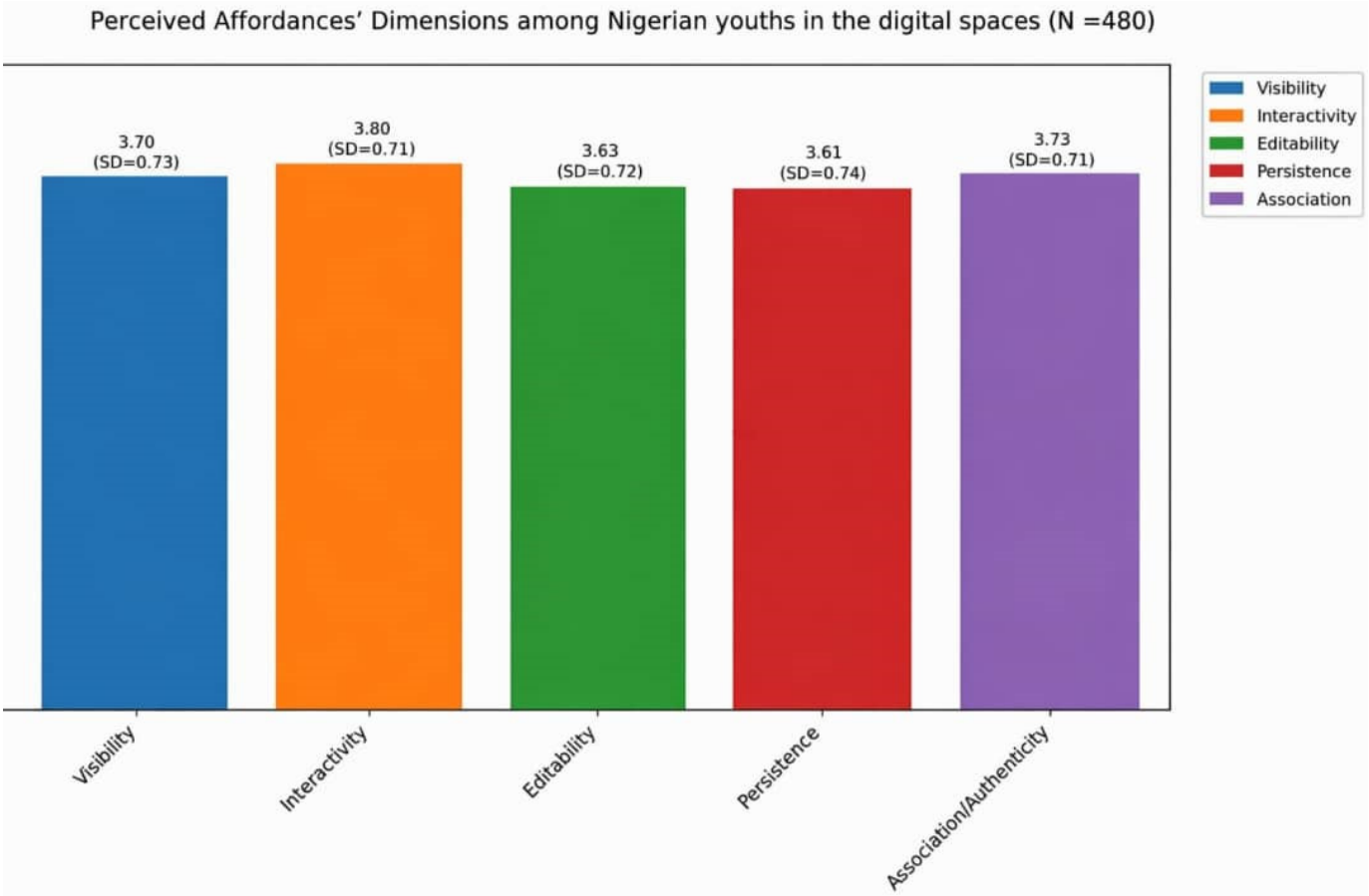


Figure 2. Mean Scores for perceived affordances' dimensions among Nigerian youths.

4.2. Self-Presentation Strategies Used by Nigerian Youths in Social Media Spaces

Figure 3 is a bar chart illustrating the mean scores for five self-presentation strategies used by Nigerian youths on social media. Across all strategies, the mean values range from 3.52 to 3.83, indicating a consistently high level of engagement with various forms of online self-presentation among respondents (n = 480). The selective self-presentation strategy is the highest-rated strategy (M = 3.83, SD = 0.68). The high mean suggests that most youths (users) consciously manage what they post (content) to control how they are perceived online, demonstrating intentional image construction. The relatively high mean profile satisfaction score (M = 3.69, SD = 0.72) suggests that youth value the similarity between their online persona and their self-concept. This indicates that social media profiles are used not just for impression management but also as expressions of identity. The strategy of using filters, captions, or edits to enhance how others perceive respondents has a relatively high mean (M = 3.65, SD = 0.75). This shows that digital enhancement tools are commonly used; although not highly rated as selective posting, the mean indicates a strong tendency to refine or beautify content before sharing. The behaviour modification strategy, with a moderate-high mean and corresponding standard deviation (M = 3.54, SD = 0.71), suggests that youths are mindful of their audience and adjust their communication accordingly. This aligns with audience-centric impression management and the desire to maintain different relational boundaries in digital spaces. The variable "comparison with others" has the lowest mean (M = 3.52, SD = 0.71). This indicates that it is the least practised strategy, even though the mean exceeds 3.5. Social comparison is a relevant strategic part of youths' posting behaviour and is dominant over other strategies.

Overall, the results show that all five strategies are actively used, emphasising the complexities and multifaceted nature of online self-presentation among Nigerian youths. Selective posting emerges as the strongest behaviour, aligning with the intentional crafting of digital identities. However, social comparison, which had a slightly lower mean, remains a critical factor in shaping online behaviour. Collectively, these findings suggest an even combination of self-expression, audience awareness, and image enhancement in the digital practices of Nigerian youths.

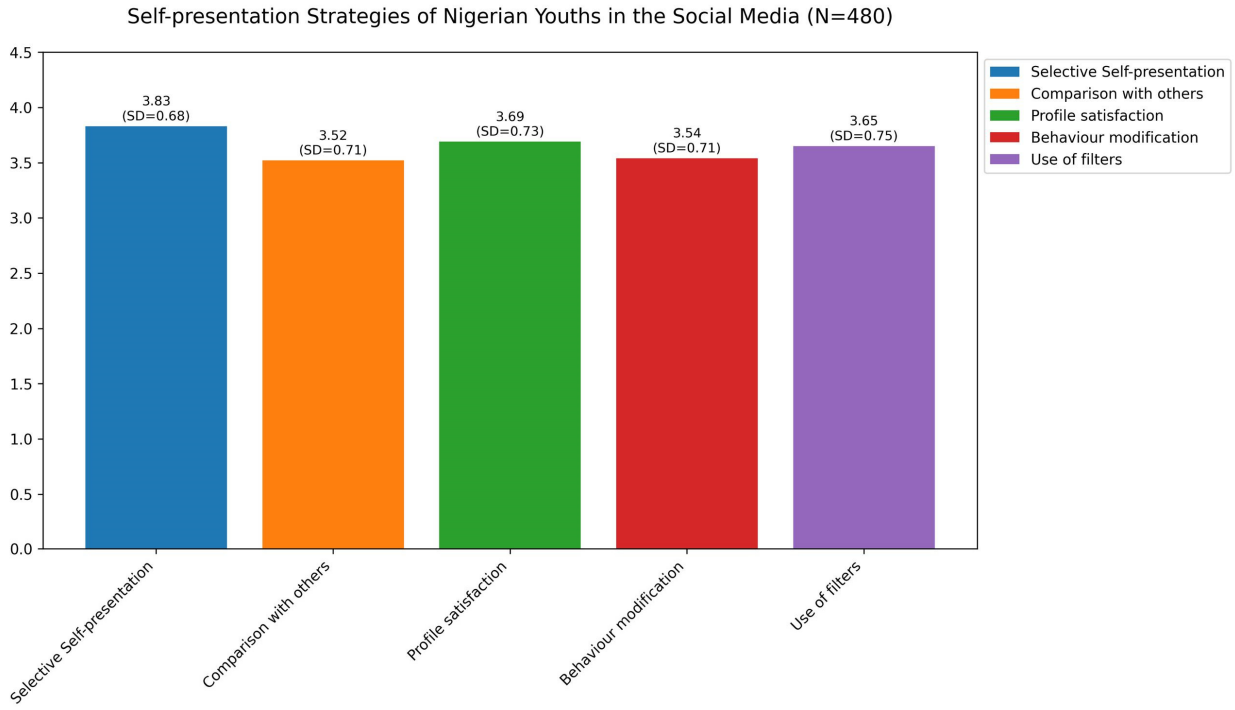


Figure 3. Bar chart on self-presentation strategies of Nigerian youths employed in social media.

4.3. Online Engagement Techniques Adopted by Nigerian Youths in Social Media Spaces

Figure 4 shows a strong agreement in the online engagement techniques of Nigerian youths. Mean scores range from 3.71 to 3.82, indicating how online engagement moderates social validation and self-presentation. As shown in Figure 3 interaction with posts (M = 3.82, SD = 0.69) and participation in discussions (M = 3.80, SD = 0.70) have the highest means, indicating active engagement and contributing to social validation. In contrast, consistency across engagement items indicates sustained online participation. The frequency of posting or sharing content (M = 3.76, SD = 0.68) keeps youths active online. Respondents strongly feel connected to others through online interaction (M = 3.71, SD = 0.73). Time spent reacting to others' posts daily also helps moderate online engagement (M = 3.72, SD = 0.72).

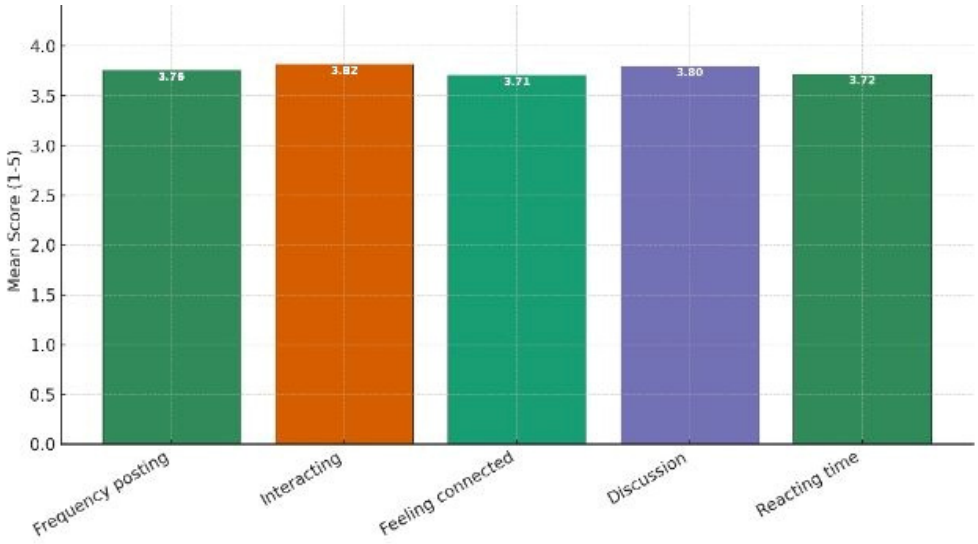


Figure 4. Bar chart showing mean values of online engagement techniques among Nigerian youths.

4.4. Social Validation Features of Nigerian Youths in Digital Spaces

Figure 5 is a bar chart that presents descriptive statistics on social validation features among Nigerian youths in the digital space. Mean scores range from 3.55 to 3.74, indicating how social validation moderates self-presentation through social media affordances. Respondents feel good when they receive likes or positive comments on their posts (M = 3.68, SD = 0.72). The number of followers respondents have amassed affects how they feel about themselves (M = 3.55, SD = 0.73). Respondents often check their posts for new likes or comments (M = 3.74, SD 0.70), while respondents express anxiety when their posts receive little attention (M = 3.58, SD = 0.74). Also, social media feedback influences respondents' mood and self-esteem (M = 3.72, SD = 0.71). Overall, the higher mean values indicate strong agreement that social media affordances strongly moderate Nigerian youth's social validation, self-presentation, and online engagement.

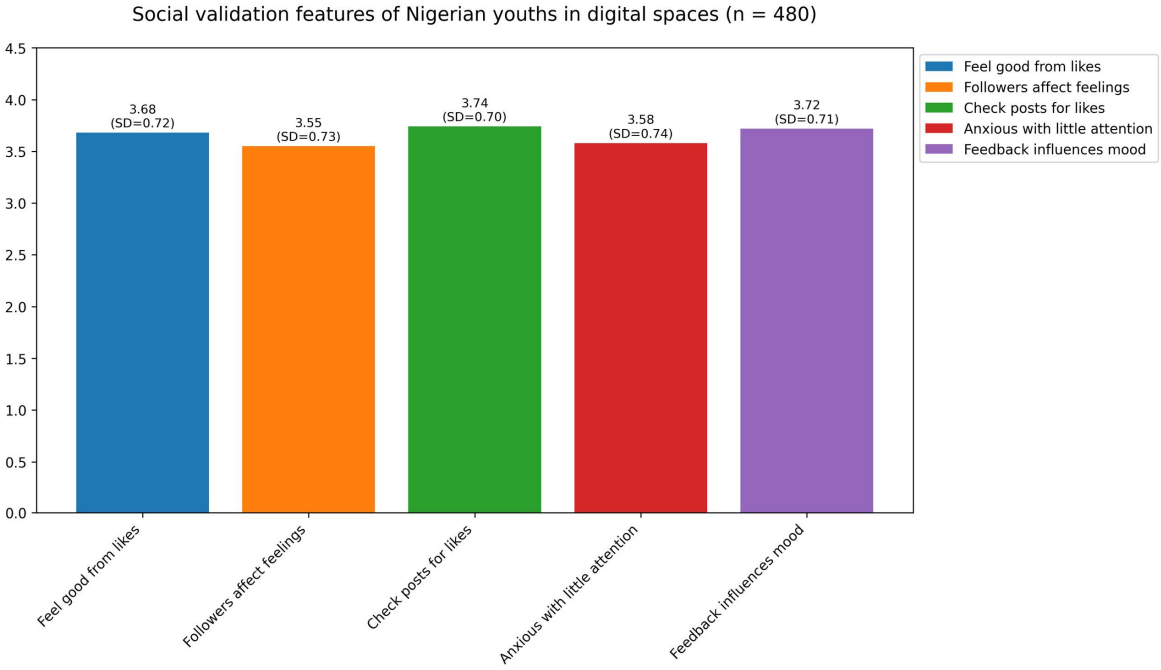


Figure 5. Mean Score of Social validation features of Nigerian youths in digital spaces (*n* = 480).

As shown in Table 6, descriptive statistics for both the independent and dependent variables indicate that items cluster around the mid-to-high agreement range (means ≈ 3.5–3.8 on a 5-point scale), indicating that Nigerian youth generally agree with the statements about affordances, self-presentation, engagement, and validation. The highest means are selective self-presentation (C1 = 3.83) and interacting with posts (D2 = 3.82), showing that respondents most strongly believe in selectively curating their representation and actively interacting with others' content. Table 6. also indicates that the lowest means are compared with others (C2 = 3.52) and persistence (B4 = 3.61). This shows a weaker but still positive agreement on social comparison and persistence of content. Furthermore, standard deviations are consistent, ranging from 0.68 to 0.75, suggesting moderate individual variability.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics on all the construct items of independent and dependent variables.

Item Code	Item Description (Abbrev.)	Mean	SD	Skew	Kurtosis	Scale Section
B1	Visibility/Ease of use	3.70	0.73	−0.05	−0.45	Affordances
B2	Interactivity	3.80	0.71	−0.21	−0.33	Affordances
B3	Editability	3.63	0.72	−0.02	−0.40	Affordances
B4	Persistence	3.61	0.74	−0.10	−0.36	Affordances
B5	Authenticity	3.75	0.71	−0.11	−0.30	Affordances
C1	Selective self-presentation	3.83	0.68	−0.26	−0.38	Self-Presentation
C2	Comparison with others	3.52	0.71	0.09	−0.31	Self-Presentation
C3	Profile satisfaction	3.69	0.73	−0.03	−0.27	Self-Presentation
C4	Behaviour modification	3.54	0.71	−0.07	−0.22	Self-Presentation
C5	Use of filters	3.65	0.75	−0.03	−0.2	Self-Presentation
D1	Frequency of posting	3.76	0.68	−0.02	−0.25	Engagement
D2	Interacting with posts	3.82	0.69	−0.14	−0.19	Engagement
D3	Feeling connected	3.71	0.73	−0.09	−0.28	Engagement
D4	Participating in discussions	3.80	0.70	−0.12	−0.21	Engagement
D5	Time reacting to posts	3.72	0.72	−0.08	−0.33	Engagement
E1	Feeling good about likes	3.68	0.72	−0.11	−0.24	Validation
E2	Followers affect self-worth	3.55	0.73	0.08	−0.26	Validation
E3	Checking likes often	3.74	0.70	−0.09	−0.21	Validation
E4	Anxiety when ignored	3.58	0.74	0.03	−0.18	Validation
E5	Mood influenced by feedback	3.72	0.71	−0.08	−0.25	Validation

Note: BI–B5, C1–C5, D1–D5, and E1–E5 denote item codes of the abbreviated item description.

Table 7 (correlation analysis) reveals moderate, positive, and statistically significant relationships among social media affordances, self-presentation, online engagement, and perceived social validation. Affordances correlated with self-presentation (r = 0.321, $p < 0.01$), engagement (r = 0.402, $p < 0.01$), and validation (r = 0.389, $p < 0.01$). Self-presentation and engagement shared a moderate association (r = 0.357, $p < 0.01$), while engagement showed the strongest link with validation (r = 0.445, $p < 0.01$). These patterns indicate an interdependent, reinforcing system in which platform features enable identity work and social interaction, which in turn generate measurable social welfare. These results generally suggest that youth who report higher selective/self-presentational behaviour also report greater online engagement and may receive more validation and attention. This is also consistent with theories where a performed identity invites interaction and feedback.

Table 7. Correlation matrix of Scale Variables.

Variables	Affordances	Self-Presentation	Engagement	Validation
Affordances	1.000	0.321	0.402	0.389
Self-presentation	0.321	1.000	0.357	0.336
Engagement	0.402	0.357	1.000	0.445
Validation	0.389	0.336	0.445	1.000

Note: $n = 480$; all off-diagonal correlations are significant at $p < 0.01$.

Though our data suggest that affordances are particularly significant under specific conditions, the positive association between perceived affordances, self-presentation, en-

gagement, and validation in the correlation analysis may seem inevitable given that these behaviours rely on platform features. Descriptively, the influence of these constructs is intensified among youths who use social media daily and those who focus their activities on highly visual and interactive platforms (TikTok and Instagram). Their influence is also amplified in network platforms where visibility and feedback have social credence. However, in these contexts, visibility, editability, and persistence affordances intensify self-presentation and the link between engagement and perceived validation.

The correlation matrix gradient is the diagrammatic representation of the strength and pattern of relationships among the four primary constructs: affordances, self-presentation, engagement, and validation (Figure 6). Within the bigger square matrix are small coloured squares that correspond to the correlation value between two constructs. The variations are represented by colour intensity, indicating a strong or weak relationship among constructs or between constructs. The darker colours indicate greater strength, while lighter colours indicate weaker strength. The numerical value inside each cell confirms the precise statistical relationship. The gradation of the matrix represents four relationship dimensions or typologies: relationships involving affordances, self-presentations, engagement, and social validation.

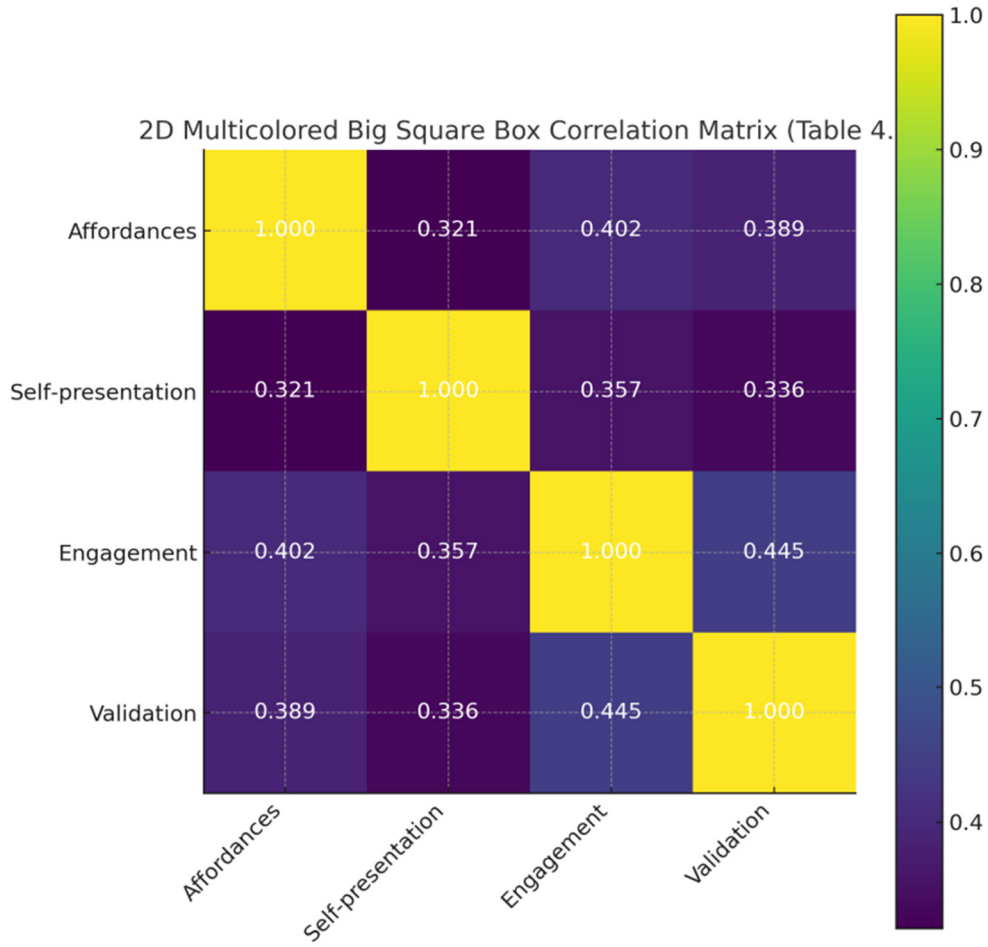


Figure 6. Correlation matrix gradient. Box is adapted from Table 7.

5. Hypotheses Test

To test the directional hypotheses, we conducted a series of regression analyses with variables treated in line with the theoretical development adopted in the study. Four hypotheses were formulated for the study. Hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 were tested using simple linear regression analysis to confirm the predictive relationships of the constructs, while

sequential mediation was used for H4. To do this, a series of regression-based models consistent with contemporary mediation practice was conducted.

Variable Notation for Hypotheses

Let:

Aff = Perceived social media affordances
SP = Self-presentation behaviours
ENG = Online engagement
VAL: Perceived validation
E = Error term

5.1. Hypothesis One

H1. *Perceived social media affordances positively predicts self-presentation behaviours among Nigerian youths.*

H1: Affordances → self-presentation
Model I: perceived affordances predicting self-presentation
Dependent variable: self-presentation
Regression Equation: SP = β0 + β1 AFF + e

The regression predicting self-presentation from perceived social media affordances is illustrated in Table 8.

Table 8. Regression predicting self-presentation from perceived social media affordances H1.

Predictor	B	SE	t	*p*	95% (LL, UL)
Constant	0.64	0.24	2.71	0.007	0.18, 1.10
Affordance	0.79	0.08	10.27	<0.001	0.64, 094

Model fit: R^2 = 0.18, Adjusted R^2 = 0.18, F (1,478) = 105.4, $p < 0.001$.

Perceived social media attendance exert a positive and statistically significant effect on self-presentation behaviours among Nigerian youths (**β** = 0.79, $p < 0.001$). Substantively, a one-unit increase in perceived affordance is associated with an increase of about 0.79 units in self-presentation on the 1–5 scale, indicating that youths who perceive platforms as more visible, editable, persistent, and associational are more likely to curate and manage how they present themselves online. With 18% of the variance in self-presentation explained, the effect can be described as moderate in magnitude, and H1 is supported.

5.2. Hypothesis Two

H2. *Self-presentation positively predicts online engagement among Nigerian youths.*

Self-presentation–Online engagement

Model2: Self-presentation predicting online engagement

$$\text{Eng} = \beta 0 = \beta 1 + \beta \text{SP} + e$$

Dependent variable: Online engagement

As shown in Table 9, self-presentation behaviours significantly and positively predict online engagement among Nigeria youths (β = 0.43, $p < 0.001$). The model explains about 18% of the variance in engagement, lending support to H2 and suggesting that strategic self-presentation is an important behavioural driver of engagement.

Table 9. Regression predicting online engagement from self-presentation H2.

Predictor	B	SE	t	*p*	95% CI (LL, UL)
Constant	1.72	0.14	12.73	<0.001	1.45, 1.98
Self-presentation	0.43	0.04	10.28	<0.001	0.35, 0.51

Model fit: R^2 = 0.18, Ad, R^2 = 0.18, F (1,478) = 105.8, $p < 0.001$.

5.3. Hypothesis Three

H3. *Online engagement positively predicts perceived social validation among Nigerian youths.*

$$VAL = \beta 0 + \beta 1\ Eng + e$$

Table 10 indicates that online engagement behaviours significantly predict perceived social media validation (B = 051, $p < 0.001$), with higher engagement associated with stronger feelings of being noticed, approved, or affirmed on social media. The model explains 24% of the variance in perceived validation, which can be considered a moderate to relatively strong proportion for behavioural survey data. Thus, H3 is supported: More active participation appears closely tied to experiences of social validation on these platforms.

Table 10. Regression predicting social validation from online engagement.

Predictor	β	SE	t	*p*	95% CI (LL, UL)
Constant	1.48	0.13	11.23	<0.001	1.22, 1.74
Engagement	0.51	0.04	12.40	<0.001	0.43, 0.59

Model fit: R^2 = 0.24, Ad, R^2 = 0.24, F (1,478) = 153.7 $p < 0.001$.

5.4. Hypothesis Four

H4. *Self-presentation and online engagement jointly and sequentially mediate the relationship between perceived affordances and perceived social validation among Nigerian youths.*

H4: Sequential Mediation: (Affordances–self-presentation–engagement–validation)
Regression equation:

(1) $SP = \beta 0 + \beta 1\ AFF + {}^{e1}$
(2) $Eng = \beta 0 = \beta 1\ AFF + \beta 2\ SP + {}^{e2}$
(3) $VAL = \beta 0 + \beta 1\ AFF + \beta 2\ SP + \beta 3\ Eng + {}^{e3}$

To test H4, a regression-based sequential mediation model was estimated with perceived affordances as the independent variable (x), self-presentation as the first mediator (MI), online engagement as the second mediator (M2), and perceived validation as the outcome (y). Path coefficients and a bootstrap estimate of the specific sequential indirect effect (x–Mi–M2–Y) are presented below.

Table 11 indicates that the exact SE and t for c' and are from the full OLS outputs, the signs and significance are as shown below. Bootstrapped sequential indirect effect: A non-parametric bootstrap with 5000 resamples (bias-corrected percentile method) was used to estimate the sequential indirect effect a1-a2-b-c'-c confidence interval for the sequential indirect effect does not include zero.

As shown in Table 12, perceived social media affordances significantly predict higher self-presentation (a1) and in turn higher self-presentation predicts higher online engagement (a2), which then predicts higher perceived validation (b). The bootstrapped sequential indirect effect is positive and statistically significant (indirect = 0.13, 95% CI [0.09, 0.19]), indicating that part of the effect of affordances on perceived validation operates through

the combined pathway of self-presentation and online engagement. Notably, once self-presentation and engagement are included, the direct effect of affordances on perceived validation becomes small and non-significant (C~−0.04, ns) while the total effect C remains positive and significant (0.30, $p < 0.001$), which is consistent with a pattern of full mediation.

Table 11. Regression paths for mediation and sequential.

Path/Model	B	SE	t	*p*
a1: Affordances–self-presentation	0.79	0.08	10.27	<0.001
a2: self-presentation–engagement (controlling X)	0.43	0.05	9.70	<0.001
a2: (x effect in same model) Affordances–Engagement	−0.08	0.09	−0.92	0.356
b: Engagement–validation (controlling X, MI)	−0.04	0.09	7.94	<0.001
C: Affordances–validation (controlling MI, M2)	−0.04	−0.08	ns	>0.05
c: Total effect (affordances–validation)	0.30	~0.07	--	<0.001

ns = not significant.

Table 12. Regression effect.

Effect	Estimate	95% CI (lLL)	95% CI UL
Indirect (Affordance-SP-ENG)	0.13	0.09	0.019

Therefore, H4 is supported: Self-presentation and online engagement jointly and sequentially mediate the relationship between perceived affordances and perceived social media validation among Nigerian youths.

6. Discussion

This study examined how perceived structural social media affordances shape self-presentation practices, online engagement, and social validation among Nigerian youths through an integrated theoretical framework of the Affordances, Uses and Gratification, and Presentation of Self theories. It also examined predictive and associative relationships among these constructs. While our findings indicate a positive association across constructs, it should not be interpreted as a confirmation of technological determinism, but rather as a demonstration of a layered process connecting platform conditions, identity performance, participation intensity, and recognition dynamics. The findings provide strong empirical support for the sequential approach that connects technological features, user motivations, and behavioural outcomes.

6.1. H1: Perceived Affordances and Self-Presentation

Our results supported HI: Perceived social media affordances significantly predict self-presentation behaviours ($\beta = 0.79$, $p < 0.001$). This finding aligns with affordance theory (Treem & Leonardi, 2012) and shows that platform features such as visibility and editability do not merely exist as technical properties but also emerge as active enablers of strategic identity construction. This further suggests that youths who perceived stronger possibilities for visibility, editability, and interactivity were more likely to curate and manage their online characters. This finding is supported by the observed positive association in the correlation analysis between affordances and self-presentation ($r = 0.321$, $p < 0.01$), reinforcing Treem and Leonardi's (2012) typology of social affordances, which this study operationalises as perceived "core action possibilities" that reconfigure communication practices, identity curation, and impression management. Treem and Leonardi's four-fold taxonomy of platform affordances is fundamentally anchored in organisational contexts, where the affordances enable certain behaviours, such as selective disclosure and networked association. This perspective is extended in this study via youth persona. When

Nigerian youths perceive these affordances as highly available, they tend engage more often in planned self-presentation. This suggests that online self-presentation may be deceptive, given certain economic and socio-cultural factors such as unemployment and pressure to impress friends and peers (Dinh & Lee, 2025; Sarfraz et al., 2025; Hu et al., 2022).

This also supports research showing that the structural properties of platforms shape self-presentation strategies and the imagined audiences users construct when posting (Nor et al., 2025). Studies by Enyinnaya (2025) and Jiang and Ngien (2020) found similar patterns where Instagram and TikTok features enhanced image curation and online self-presentation.

6.2. H2: Perceived Self-Presentation and Online Engagement

The analyses supported H2, which states that self-presentation significantly predicts online engagement (such as sharing, commenting, and active participation on the platform ($\beta = 0.43$, $p < 0.001$). Our findings show that Nigerian youths or users who invest more in front-stage profiles and posts intend to engage more intensively through sharing and commenting analyses. The finding aligns with Goffman's presentation of self theory, which posits that performance requires ongoing interaction with the audience, suggesting that curated identities are not passive representations but active performances designed to attract audience attention. Our findings also support Gever and Okoro's (2020) findings that self-presentation tactics (self-promotion and ingratiation) significantly predict responsiveness to political content on Facebook. Our findings also highlight that the significant relationship between self-presentation and online engagement underscores a shift from identity creation to interactive participation.

6.3. H3: Online Engagement Predicts Perceived Social Validation

This hypothesis is strongly supported by the analyses (B = 0.051, $p < 0.001$) and provides empirical support for the motivational logic exemplified in the Uses and Gratifications Theory. Our findings indicate that higher levels of visible behaviours (posting, liking, commenting, and sharing) were associated with stronger feelings of being validated and noticed online. This shows that engagement behaviours predominantly serve as mechanisms users use to seek and obtain validation. In the Nigerian context, social validation is not only seen as psychological satisfaction but also as symbolic recognition, status signalling, and social relevance. This notion, however, positions engagement as both a behavioural outcome and a means of satisfying deeper gratification needs. Findings are consistent with a few Nigerian studies indicating that Nigerian youths increasingly assess their self-worth through online feedback (Bibian & Ma'rof, 2024). A variation of this claim has been demonstrated in a study on young Nigerians' mental health. Its findings explain a dual effect: Validation through engagement can boost belonging, but it can also expose youth to comparison pressures when feedback is negative or absent.

6.4. H4: Sequential Media of Self-Presentation and Engagement

Finally, our results show that the mediation analysis confirms that self-presentation and engagement sequentially mediate the relationship between affordances and social validation. Affordances significantly foster more intensive engagement, which in turn intensifies perceived validation. The significant indirect path from affordances to validation via self-presentation and engagement highlights the model's process nature (Aff-SP-Eng-Val). This finding demonstrates a key theoretical contribution of the study, which goes beyond treating validation as a direct outcome of platform features to something that emerges through a processual (procedural) chain of behavioural mechanisms. Affordances enable self-presentation, self-presentation drives engagement, and engagement produces validation. This integrated pathway supports an integrated theoretical framing that por-

trays affordances, uses and gratifications, and the presentation of self as operating in unison rather than in isolation.

Also, our pattern of findings explains the theoretical perspectives on how affordances provide the "how"; uses and gratifications motives make sense of "why" youths invest in these activities; and Goffman's dramaturgy explains the micro-performative "how" of self-presentation and engagement in front-stage spaces. The findings of existing Nigerian research point in the direction of this study. Enyinnaya (2025) revealed how Instagram's visual affordances enable staged performances that attract both cultural recognition and commercial validation. This is also consistent with Dunu and Abaneme's (2024) study on how Nigerian women's curated selfies on Facebook function as performances that negotiate identity and status. However, our findings extend this logic to a specific group, suggesting that Nigerian youths are more likely to use platform affordances to enhance their visibility, seek validation, and build digital social capital that increasingly boosts reputation and offline opportunities. The findings of the study are also consistent with those of a recent study by Liu and Kie (2025) on the efficacy of impression management. Liu and Kie (2025) indicate that users who feel more competent in managing impressions through self-presentation and engagement features are more confident and persistent in using social media to pursue social status and popularity. Empirically, this present study supports this perspective by identifying a path from structural affordances to validation via impression-oriented behaviour. While some affordance studies emphasise direct impacts of features on outcomes (knowledge contribution and organisational performance) (Zhou et al., 2023). Our study findings suggest that, in youth social media contexts, the impact of affordances on perceived validation is largely indirect, flowing through self-presentation and engagement. This suggests that affordances can vary across platforms even when self-presentation is similar. Validation can also differ even when encouragement is high.

The regression-based sequential mediation model suggests a procedural chain of behavioural mechanisms among the study's constructs, which reinforces interactional dimensions. While this raises the possibility of a shared underlying factor of networked sociability, we retain the analytical distinction because each construct refers to a different moment in the interactional chain: what platforms make possible (affordance), how people act (self-presentation and engagement), and how they feel recognised (validation).

These findings should be interpreted in the light of the characteristics of Nigerian youth culture. For many young Nigerians, social media is not just a recreational space but also a significant platform for reputation-building, exploring diverse identities, and gaining acceptance and credibility with family, peers, and cultural and religious norms. This may provide insight into why engagement and validation are strongly connected to this study's data, and why visibility and editability affordances can be significantly higher than in some Global North contexts. Furthermore, this study provides insight into how factors such as unequal access to digital infrastructure, high data costs, and socio-economic inequalities influence how young people perceive and use social media affordances. This imbalance reemphasises the need to situate social media research within Global Majority contexts, where technology adoption and usage patterns are ingrained in the socio-economic realities facing Nigeria.

This study expands the literature by providing a theoretically integrated account that distinctively explains the roles of affordances, motivation, and performative practices within the unified framework. Through the empirically demonstrated sequential mechanism linking distinct constructs, the concerns of conceptual overlap are addressed. Finally, the study has expanded social media research into a non-Western context by providing valuable insights into how digital interaction processes are influenced by local conditions.

7. Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research Direction

This study employed regression and a regression-based sequential mediation model to determine relationships among affordances, self-presentation, engagement, and validation. Pearson's correlation was used to show the strength of associations among the four core study constructs. For future research, there is a need to test the networked sociability factor, as this present study is anchored in a process-based specification due to its integrative theoretical alignment. Future research should also consider integrating survey reports, platform behavioural data, and qualitative data to better differentiate desired from actual practices. A longitudinal study to understand the effects of specific platform metrics, such as algorithm and visibility, on social validation and self-presentation within a non-Western context, is also needed.

8. Conclusions

This study explored how perceived social media affordances, self-presentation, and online engagement collectively shape experiences of social validation among Nigerian youths, using an integrated framework that combines Affordance theory, Goffman's Dramaturgical perspectives, and Uses and Gratifications. By analytically separating platform-level possibilities (affordances), social interaction (self-presentation and engagement), and evaluative outcomes (validation), the study goes beyond treating these as a single construct and rather conceptualises a process connecting what platforms make possible, what youths do with these possibilities, and how valued they feel later.

However, the moderate but consistent positive correction among the four constructs, together with the tested sequential pathway from affordances through self-presentation and engagement to validation, suggests that a common digital relationship process is at work while still allowing for notable differences across the stages of the process. Study findings show that when Nigerian youths perceive visibility, interactivity, editability, and persistence as available and usable, they report more intentional, higher-interactive participation, and stronger subjective feelings of being noticed, accepted, or recognised. The most significant connection between engagement and validation highlights that continuous engagement in everyday interactions is not solely a function of validation.

Similarly, results show that validation operates with other gratifications (identity expression, sociability, and information seeking), reinforcing a mixed motivational ecosystem that is not purely validation-driven. In this vein, the study contributes to Global Majority scholarship by showing that Nigerian youths use global platforms within a defined cultural and socio-economic condition, where online impression enacts an imbalance of status, opportunity, and support. The integrative theoretical framework specifies "how" and "why" affordances matter outside technological determinism or claims.

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