



THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ENGAGEMENT ON CONTENT SHARING BEHAVIOUR: EVIDENCE FROM GEN-Z SOCIAL MEDIA USERS IN SRI LANKA

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In today's digital world, social media plays a prominent role becoming an integral part of daily life. Users across multiple generations, including Gen Z, millennials, Gen X, and baby boomers have become active consumers of social media, highlighting the importance of understanding user behaviour. This study aims to determine whether there is a definite relationship between one's engagement on social media platforms and their content sharing behaviour. The study investigates three key dimensions of social media engagement: consumption, contribution, and creation as independent variables, while content sharing behaviour is treated as the dependent variable. Previous studies have largely examined these variables in isolation, incorporating descriptive models and scales to determine the influencing factors. This study adopted a hypothetico-deductive approach, supported by a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. Data were gathered from 800 individuals using a purposive, structured questionnaire targeting Sri Lankan individuals aged between 18 and 29 years. To examine the relationship between social media engagement and content sharing behaviour, correlation and linear regression analyses were utilized. The results indicated a significant positive relationship, suggesting that higher levels of social media engagement are associated with increased content sharing behaviour. The study provides significant benefits to anyone who expects to gain a thorough understanding of a typical Sri Lankan individual's social media behaviour and to any digital marketing professional who intends to utilize the study's conclusions to effectively target consumers based on their social media behaviour, both in terms of engagement and content sharing. Furthermore, future researchers could explore the behavioural aspects of content sharing, specific content types, or generational differences to gain deeper insights into how social media engagement influences sharing behaviour.

Keywords: social media engagement, content sharing, user behaviour, Gen-Z, Sri Lanka

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INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have evolved into interactive ecosystems where users create, share, and engage with diverse content. According to Merriam-Webster, social media refers to “forms of electronic communication through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content.” With platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok reporting millions of posts and interactions every minute (Heitman, 2022), understanding what drives this engagement is highly important, particularly among Generation Z. This study explores the relationship between social media engagement and content sharing behaviour; two areas often studied in isolation by previous scholars. Despite the growing dominance of social media in Sri Lanka, limited scholarly attention has been given to the combined effect of engagement and content sharing behaviors among Gen Z. According to Data Reportal (2024), over 55% of Sri Lankans are active social media users, with the highest concentration among those aged 18–29. However, existing research often examines either engagement or sharing independently, creating a gap in understanding how these behaviors interact in the local context. Addressing this gap is critical to inform both academic discourse and practical strategies for digital marketers seeking to leverage Gen Z’s dynamic online behaviors. While many scholars have investigated online engagement (Cao et al., 2021; Trunfio & Rossi, 2021), others have studied content sharing behavior (Toh & Lee, 2022; Artanti, 2018). Hence, there is a noticeable gap in studies that link both concepts. This research aims to fill that gap, using the COBRA model (Muntinga et al., 2011) to define engagement via consumption, contribution, and creation, and drawing on FIRO theory to understand interpersonal motivations like inclusion, control, and openness.

The study is guided by the following objectives:

- RO1: To determine whether consumption on social media influences content sharing behavior.
- RO2: To determine whether contribution on social media influences content sharing behavior.



- RO3: To determine whether creation on social media influences content sharing behavior.

Focusing on young adults aged 18–30, the study provides insight into how members of Gen-Z use digital platforms for expression and connection. While previous local research focused on more general outcomes such as academic impact (Nuskiya, 2017) or media trends (Thuseethan, 2015), this study delves deeper into behavioral dynamics. The findings will offer both theoretical contributions and practical implications. Academically, it strengthens the link between user engagement theories and content dissemination behavior. Practically, it will help digital marketers and content creators understand what motivates sharing behavior, aiding in the development of more targeted, effective content strategies that leverage user engagement to amplify reach. By examining the interplay between how users engage with digital platforms and how they share content, this study contributes to a better understanding of digital behavior in the Sri Lankan context.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a positivist research philosophy and a hypothetico-deductive approach to explore the influence of social media engagement on content sharing behavior among Sri Lankan young adults. A quantitative mono-method strategy was used, employing a cross-sectional survey design to collect data through an online structured questionnaire. The conceptual framework builds upon the Consumers' Online Brand-Related Activities (COBRA) model (Muntinga et al., 2011), Uses and Gratifications Theory (Artanti, 2018; Toh & Lee, 2022), and Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation (FIRO) theory (Schutz, 2009). Social media engagement was measured across consumption, contribution, and creation (Cao et al., 2021; Trunfio & Rossi, 2021) while content sharing behavior served as the dependent variable. The following hypotheses were tested:

- H1: Social media consumption positively impacts content sharing behavior
- H2: Social media contribution positively impacts content sharing behavior
- H3: Social media creation positively impacts content sharing behavior

A total of 800 valid responses were collected using judgment sampling, targeting individuals aged 18–30 years. Data cleaning involved removing incomplete and duplicate submissions to ensure accuracy and reliability. The unit of analysis was the individual. Questionnaire items were adapted from prior studies and measured using a 7-point Likert scale, consisting of 13 items across four constructs

- Social Media Consumption (Cao et al., 2021; Muntinga et al., 2011)
- Social Media Contribution (Trunfio & Rossi, 2021)
- Social Media Creation (Cao et al., 2021)



- Content Sharing Behavior (Artanti, 2018; Schutz, 2009; Toh & Lee, 2022)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to Hayes (2023), demographic analysis is essential in contextualizing findings. The sample included a balanced gender distribution (53.30% male, 46.23% female), and the dominant age group was 22–24 years (59.43%). Most participants were from the Western Province, primarily Colombo district. Descriptive data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 26, supported by reliability and validity testing. Cronbach’s Alpha for all variables exceeded 0.7, ensuring internal consistency. According to Garson (2012), descriptive statistics are used to assess patterns and data integrity. The analysis showed moderate mean scores across all constructs, indicating neutral to moderately agreed responses regarding engagement and content sharing. Correlation analysis using Pearson’s matrix revealed statistically significant relationships between all independent variables and the dependent variable content sharing behavior. As per Sekeran & Bougie (2016) and Cohen (1988), social media creation exhibited a large correlation ($r = .561$), followed by contribution ($r = .477$) and consumption ($r = .304$), indicating moderate correlations.

Table 1: Summary of Pearson Correlation Matrix

	CON	CTR	CRE	CSB
CON Pearson Correlation	1			
CTR Pearson Correlation	.434**	1		
CRE Pearson Correlation	.326**	.451**	1	
CSB Pearson Correlation	.304**	.477**	.561**	1

Source: Primary Data

A multiple regression analysis was conducted without a constant, as the p-value of the intercept exceeded 0.05. As outlined by Sekeran & Bougie (2016), regression analysis helps to determine the predictive strength of each independent variable. The adjusted R^2 value was 0.900, indicating that 90% of the variance in content sharing behavior is explained by the model. This unusually high adjusted R^2 prompted diagnostic checks for potential overfitting and multicollinearity. Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) values were all below the acceptable threshold of 5, indicating that multicollinearity was not a significant issue and that the model’s predictive strength is robust. The Durbin-Watson value of 1.930 confirmed independence of residuals (Field, 2009).



Table 2: Regression Analysis Model Summary
Model Summary

Model	R	R Square ^b	Adjusted Square	RStd. Error of the Estimate	Durbin-Watson
1	.949 ^a	.901	.900	1.22638	1.930

Source: Primary Data

ANOVA results indicate that the regression model is statistically significant ($F = 635.639$, $p < .05$), suggesting that the independent variables collectively explain a significant portion of the variation in the dependent variable (Pathak, 2020; Beers, 2023).

Table 3: Regression Analysis ANOVA Test
ANOVA

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	2867.998	3	955.999	635.639	.000 ^c
	Residual	314.335	209	1.504		
	Total	3182.333 ^d	212			

Source: Primary Data

The standardized beta coefficients were as follows: social media creation ($\beta = .399$, $p = .000$), contribution ($\beta = .327$, $p = .000$), and consumption ($\beta = .248$, $p = .001$). These results confirm that all three independent variables significantly influence content sharing behavior. In conclusion, the study validates the conceptual model and accepts all three hypotheses, emphasizing the significance of various forms of social media engagement in shaping online sharing behavior.

Table Error! No text of specified style in document.: Regression Analysis Coefficients
Coefficients

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	CON	.204	.061	.248	3.361	.001
	CTR	.307	.071	.327	4.356	.000
	CRE	.370	.053	.399	6.989	.000

Source: Primary Data

The dominance of the creation dimension may reflect Gen Z’s preference for active self-expression and identity building through content creation. In the Sri Lankan context, cultural factors such as collectivism and strong peer influence may also motivate users to share original content to maintain social belonging and enhance



visibility within their communities. This highlights the need for marketers to design campaigns that tap into these cultural dynamics.

CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

The study investigated the influence of social media engagement on content sharing behavior through a conceptual model comprising Social Media Consumption, Contribution, and Creation as independent variables, and Content Sharing Behavior as the dependent variable. Based on a sample of 800 Sri Lankan respondents aged over 18, the study adopted a quantitative approach and employed multiple linear regression analysis to assess the impact of the independent variables. Key findings revealed that the sample demographics were consistent with Sri Lankan social media user patterns (Hayes, 2023). Descriptive analysis indicated moderate engagement and sharing behavior. Correlation analysis showed statistically significant positive relationships between each independent variable and the dependent variable, with correlation coefficients of .304 (consumption), .477 (contribution), and .561 (creation), significant at the 0.01 level. The regression analysis confirmed that all three engagement dimensions significantly affect content sharing behavior, with an adjusted R^2 of .900. Unstandardized coefficients were positive (.204, .307, .370 respectively) and statistically significant ($p = .001, .000, .000$), affirming the model's strength. Thus, all three hypotheses were accepted, concluding that social media engagement has a significant positive impact on content sharing behavior. The research questions and objectives were addressed and met. This study is limited by its use of purposive sampling and concentration of respondents in the Western Province, which may affect generalizability. Future research could address this by employing probability sampling and including participants from a wider range of geographic regions. These findings provide valuable insights for Sri Lankan academia and the digital marketing sector. The study also fills a gap by jointly analyzing engagement and content sharing areas previously examined separately. Practically, the results offer guidance for digital marketers to design content strategies aligned with user engagement behaviors, leveraging mechanisms such as viral effects and electronic word-of-mouth. For practitioners, leveraging user-generated content campaigns and interactive digital strategies could be particularly effective, especially those that encourage creative participation from Gen Z users. Additionally, tailoring messages that resonate with cultural values, such as community and inclusivity, could enhance sharing behavior and amplify brand reach. Future research could explore the behavioral dimensions of content sharing in greater detail, assess specific content types, or test generational moderating effects, particularly including Millennials and Generation X. The study thus lays the foundation for expanding scholarly understanding of social media behavior in both local and broader contexts.



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