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ENGAGING CONTENT AND CUSTOMER BACKLASH: HOW FOMO AND FATIGUE DRIVE NEGATIVE ENGAGEMENT ON DOUYIN

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Abstract

While social media content is traditionally designed to foster brand-customer interaction, emerging evidence indicates that engagement-oriented strategies can unintentionally provoke severe customer backlash. Grounded in the Stressor-Strain-Outcome (SSO) framework, this study comprehensively investigates how remunerative and relational content strategies on Douyin trigger direct negative customer engagement. Analyzing survey data from 510 active Douyin users via partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM), the research uncovers a dual serial mediation mechanism. The empirical results robustly demonstrate that continuous exposure to both remunerative and relational content significantly intensifies users' social fear of missing out (FOMO). This heightened psychological strain subsequently escalates into social media fatigue, a state deeply characterized by emotional exhaustion and cognitive overload. Ultimately, this fatigue directly precipitates negative behavioral outcomes, specifically including public complaints, brand criticism, and intentional avoidance. By illuminating how ostensibly engaging marketing messages operate as psychological stressors, this research significantly advances contemporary literature on the dark side of customer engagement. The findings provide marketing managers with critical, actionable insights into designing emotionally sustainable content strategies that actively mitigate reputational risks in highly saturated digital ecosystems.

Keywords: Direct Negative Customer Engagement, Social Media Fatigue, Social FOMO, Remunerative and Relational Content, Stressor-Strain-Outcome (SSO) Framework

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Introduction

The exponential rise of short-video platforms such as Douyin in China has transformed social media into a dominant arena for brand communication and consumer engagement (de Masi & Diviggiano, 2018). Despite their unprecedented reach and interactive potential, an increasing number of users report emotional exhaustion and disengagement rather than sustained enthusiasm. While brands invest substantial resources in content marketing to stimulate participation, users frequently experience information overload, emotional pressure, or irritation toward content that is ostensibly designed to entertain or assist (Pang, 2021). This paradox, whereby engagement-oriented content alienates rather than attracts its audience, remains insufficiently explored in current academic discourse.

Existing studies have largely conceptualized social media content as an instrument for enhancing customer engagement (Park et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2021), with limited attention to its potential adverse effects. In particular, content intended to foster transactional or relational connections may inadvertently activate psychological strain, such as FOMO, which can subsequently escalate into emotional fatigue and reactive disengagement (Lee et al., 2019). Although prior research acknowledges social media fatigue and negative engagement behaviors, little is known about the emotional pathways by which distinct content types precipitate these reactions.

Addressing this gap, the present study develops a serial mediation model grounded in the SSO framework (Koeske & Koeske, 1993; Pang, 2021), proposing that remunerative content, focused on financial incentives, and relational content, focused on social connectedness, act as external stressors that trigger social FOMO. This heightened emotional strain subsequently induces social media fatigue, which ultimately leads to direct negative customer engagement (DNCE), such as public complaints, criticism, or brand rejection (Naumann et al., 2020). By empirically examining these mechanisms in the context of Douyin, this research illuminates the emotional costs of engagement-driven strategies. It deepens understanding of the dark side of social media marketing, where well-intentioned content strategies may paradoxically erode rather than enhance customer relationships.

Literature Review

SSO Framework

The Stressor-Strain-Outcome (SSO) framework offers a well-established theoretical foundation for explaining how external demands give rise to internal psychological responses that subsequently shape behavioral outcomes (Koeske & Koeske, 1989; Koeske & Koeske, 1993). Within this framework, stressors are environmental or situational demands that challenge an individual's adaptive capacity; strain is the emotional or cognitive tension arising from exposure to such demands; and outcomes are the observable behavioral or attitudinal responses, including withdrawal, resistance, or disengagement (Shi et al., 2020). Central to the SSO logic is a sequential process in which external stressors trigger psychological strain, which then translates into either adaptive or maladaptive outcomes.

In digital and social media contexts, the SSO framework has been widely employed to account for user responses to platform-related stressors, such as information overload, social pressure, and privacy concerns. Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that these stressors intensify users' psychological strain, most notably as social media fatigue, which in turn undermines sustained engagement and participation (Lee et al., 2019; Xie & Tsai, 2021). Despite these insights, prior research has largely focused on technological or systemic stressors inherent in platform design or functionality, while paying comparatively little attention to stressors arising from content-level exposure (Sakdapat & Ngamcharoen, 2025). Specifically, the emotional consequences of the nature, tone, and intent of marketing messages remain underexplored.

Building on this gap, the present study extends the SSO framework by conceptualizing remunerative content, such as promotional or incentive-based posts, and relational content, such as socially or emotionally engaging messages, as content-specific stressors. Exposure to these content types may heighten social FOMO, a stress-related emotional state characterized by anxiety over missing rewarding experiences or social interactions. This heightened emotional strain can subsequently evolve into social media fatigue, reflecting emotional exhaustion and cognitive overload. Fatigue, in turn, manifests behaviorally as DNCE, including complaints, criticism, and brand avoidance.

By introducing social FOMO and fatigue as sequential emotional mechanisms within the SSO framework, this study shifts the analytical focus from predominantly technical antecedents to the emotional costs embedded in marketing communication. This refined application of the SSO framework underscores how engagement-oriented content strategies, although designed to stimulate participation, may paradoxically generate psychological strain and provoke counterproductive behavioral responses. In doing so, the study advances understanding of the dark side of social media engagement and highlights the unintended consequences of content-driven interaction strategies.

Consumer Engagement on Social Media

Consumer engagement on social media has garnered significant attention for its positive impacts on businesses (Naumann et al., 2020). Through social media participation, consumers strengthen emotional bonds with companies, accelerate the dissemination of information, rapidly build word-of-mouth reputations, and share personal experiences to provide valuable references for others (Hollebeek et al., 2014). The relationship between social media content and consumer engagement is therefore closely intertwined. Huang et al. (2024) indicate that consumption-based, contribution-based, and creation-based engagement are influenced by social media content, such that the entertainment value, interactivity, and customization of content significantly and positively shape consumer engagement behaviors.

As numerous businesses increasingly rely on social media to disseminate promotional content, users may become inundated with unsolicited information, which can undermine their willingness to engage and trigger negative responses such as purchase cessation, brand boycotts, negative word-of-mouth, and switching to competitors (Yadav et al., 2025). Younger generations, in particular, tend to reduce engagement with brands and spend less time browsing brand-related information under such conditions, posing new challenges for firms seeking to develop effective customer engagement strategies on social media platforms (Pang & Ruan, 2023).

Social Media Content and Social FOMO

Social media content generally falls into two broad categories: remunerative content, which emphasizes transactional features such as discounts, specifications, and purchasing incentives, and relational content, which evokes emotional resonance and social connectedness through storytelling, interaction, or community-building activities (Ashley & Tuten, 2015). While remunerative content primarily appeals to users' utilitarian motivations, relational content is designed to satisfy socio-emotional needs such as belonging and affiliation. As these content types activate different motivational orientations, they generate distinct psychological expectations among users.

Drawing on self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 2012) and the Stressor-Strain-Outcome (SSO) framework, we argue that these expectations can operate as latent psychological stressors. When users perceive the possibility of missing opportunities, such as time-limited deals, or socially meaningful moments, such as trending community interactions, they may experience psychological tension. This tension manifests as social fear of missing out (FOMO), a stress-like emotional state characterized by anxiety over being excluded from potentially rewarding or socially relevant experiences (Przybylski et al., 2013; Elhai et al.,

2016). Within the SSO framework, remunerative and relational content function as environmental stressors, while FOMO represents a form of psychological strain that shapes subsequent behavioral responses. Existing research has linked FOMO to persistent content monitoring, emotional disturbance, and compulsive platform use (Whelan et al., 2020); however, limited attention has been paid to how distinct content strategies differentially elicit such emotional reactions.

We posit that both content types heighten perceived social vulnerability, albeit through different mechanisms: remunerative content intensifies fear of missed rewards, whereas relational content amplifies fear of social exclusion. Accordingly, both content strategies are expected to function as antecedents of social FOMO. This perspective extends prior research that treats FOMO primarily as a generalized consequence of excessive social media use by highlighting how specific messaging strategies themselves may become emotionally counterproductive. Based on this reasoning, we propose the following hypotheses:

H1: Exposure to remunerative content on social media is positively associated with users' social FOMO.

H2: Exposure to relational content on social media is positively associated with users' social FOMO.

Social FOMO and Social Media Fatigue

Social FOMO has been increasingly recognized as an important psychological mechanism shaping consumer responses in digital environments. When remunerative and relational content simultaneously compete for users' attention on social media, individuals are more likely to engage in social comparison processes, which amplify social FOMO and may ultimately suppress consumption-related behaviors (Liu & Bunchapattanasakda, 2025; Ngamcharoen et al., 2025). Importantly, the influence of social FOMO on consumer behavior is not limited to direct effects; it may also operate indirectly through emotional depletion, most notably as social media fatigue.

Social media fatigue is commonly defined as a multidimensional psychological state characterized by emotional exhaustion, cognitive overload, and a sense of detachment from online environments (Bright et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2022). Users experiencing heightened social FOMO, marked by persistent anxiety about missing socially or personally valuable content, tend to remain hyperconnected and cognitively vigilant. This often manifests in compulsive checking, excessive content consumption, and overcommitment to digital interactions (Beyens et al., 2016; Elhai et al., 2016). Drawing on Conservation of Resources (COR) theory (Hobfoll, 1989), we argue that social FOMO functions as a chronic emotional stressor that gradually depletes users' psychological resources. In an effort to avoid perceived exclusion, users invest sustained attention, emotional energy, and self-regulatory effort, which cumulatively leads to cognitive and emotional exhaustion. This reasoning is consistent with prior findings linking FOMO to digital burnout, sleep disturbance, and disengagement from online platforms (Whelan et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2018). Accordingly, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3: Social FOMO is positively associated with social media fatigue.

Social Media Fatigue and DNCE

Social media fatigue refers to a chronic psychological state of exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to emotionally and cognitively demanding social media content (Zhang et al., 2022). As users experience fatigue, they tend to become less tolerant of brand communications, more reactive to perceived intrusions, and increasingly inclined to express dissatisfaction with marketing stimuli.

Direct negative customer engagement (DNCE) is characterized by active behaviors such as complaints, public criticism, negative word-of-mouth, and intentional brand avoidance triggered by negative affective states (Dolan et al., 2019). Unlike passive disengagement,

DNCE represents an emotionally charged behavioral response through which consumers seek to penalize brands they perceive as responsible for their negative experiences.

From the perspective of the Stressor-Strain-Outcome framework, social media fatigue functions as a psychological strain that undermines users' emotional regulation and reduces their capacity to cope with ongoing marketing stimuli. Consequently, fatigued users may engage in retaliatory responses, particularly when they attribute their exhaustion to persistent, excessive, or manipulative brand content (Xie & Tsai, 2021).

Consistent with this reasoning, prior research demonstrates that users experiencing social media fatigue are more likely to unfollow brands, lodge complaints, or avoid firms that overwhelm them with information (Bright et al., 2015; Zhang et al., 2022). Therefore, we propose the following hypothesis:

H4: Social media fatigue is positively associated with DNCE.

Serial Mediation Effect of Social FOMO and Social Media Fatigue

Building on the SSO framework, this study theorizes a serial mediation mechanism whereby social media content directly and negatively affects customer engagement via two sequential emotional states: social fear of missing out and social media fatigue. Specifically, remunerative and relational content heighten users' fear of missing out on personally relevant or socially meaningful experiences (Przybylski et al., 2013). Sustained exposure to such emotionally salient content gradually depletes users' emotional and cognitive resources, ultimately resulting in social media fatigue (Beyens et al., 2016; Elhai et al., 2016).

Drawing on Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), we further argue that social FOMO represents an emotionally taxing preoccupation that initiates the first phase of psychological strain. This heightened emotional vigilance intensifies social media use and undermines self-regulatory capacity, thereby accelerating the depletion of personal resources and leading to fatigue. Once users enter this exhausted state, they are more likely to engage in retaliatory or avoidant behaviors, including public complaints, negative word of mouth, or explicit disengagement from brands (Dolan et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2022).

Although prior research has examined the roles of social FOMO and social media fatigue separately, limited attention has been paid to how these emotional processes jointly operate as a sequential pathway linking content exposure to customer backlash. Addressing this gap, the present study positions social FOMO and social media fatigue as serial mediators between social media content strategies and direct negative customer engagement. Accordingly, we propose the following hypotheses:

H5: The relationship between remunerative content on social media and DNCE is serially mediated by social FOMO and social media fatigue.

H6: The relationship between relational content on social media and DNCE is serially mediated by social FOMO and social media fatigue.

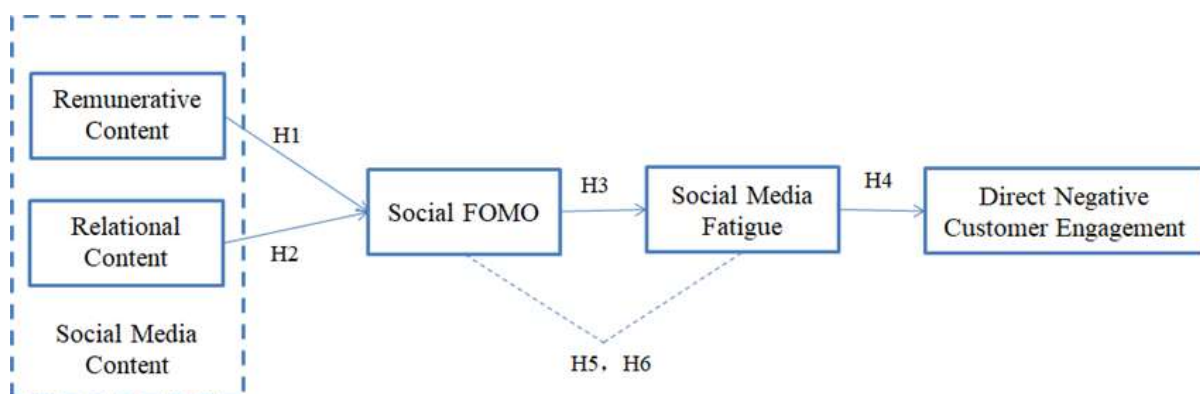


Figure 1 Research Framework

Research Methodology

Sample and Data Collection

Data were collected through an online survey administered via WenJuanXing, a widely used professional survey platform in mainland China. The sampling process targeted active Douyin users residing in regions with high platform penetration, including Guangdong, Beijing, and Shanghai. The survey was conducted between May and July 2025. A total of 800 questionnaires were distributed, and 755 responses were received (response rate: 94.38%). After removing responses with inconsistent answers or insufficient Douyin usage history (less than three months), 510 valid responses were retained for analysis. The final sample was gender-balanced (49.6% male, 50.4% female), with 85.7% under 40 years old. Most respondents (73.5%) had used Douyin for over three years.

Measures

All latent constructs were measured using validated multi-item scales adapted from prior studies, rated on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree). Remunerative content was assessed using 3 items from Kulikovskaja et al. (2023) that captured users' perceptions of financially incentivized posts (e.g., discounts, coupons, purchase links). Relational content was measured using 6 items from the same source, focusing on content that promotes emotional connection and social interaction (e.g., brand storytelling, lifestyle messaging, user-generated posts). Social FOMO was assessed with 4 items adapted from Singh & Banerjee (2024), reflecting anxiety about missing socially or personally relevant content. Social media fatigue was measured using 5 items from Whelan et al. (2020) that captured emotional exhaustion and cognitive overload associated with prolonged platform use. Direct negative customer engagement was assessed with 6 items from Naumann et al. (2020), including behaviors such as complaints, criticism, and resistance toward brand communication.

Data Analysis

This study employed partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) using SmartPLS 4 to test the proposed framework. As a variance-based approach, PLS-SEM is well suited for estimating complex mediation models and is less reliant on distributional assumptions; moreover, bootstrapping-based inference is robust when data deviate from normality (Hair et al., 2014; Hair et al., 2017). Accordingly, PLS-SEM was appropriate given the study's predictive orientation and focus on serial mediation. Path significance and indirect effects were assessed via bootstrapping with 5,000 resamples.

Research Results

The reliability and validity of the reflective measurement model were rigorously assessed in accordance with established guidelines for partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) (Hair et al., 2014). As shown in Table 1, all constructs demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.782 for remunerative content to 0.882 for social media fatigue, while composite reliability values varied between 0.782 and 0.888. All reliability estimates exceeded the recommended threshold of 0.70, indicating an acceptable level of internal consistency. Convergent validity was evaluated using the average variance extracted (AVE). The AVE values ranged from 0.588 for direct negative customer engagement to 0.717 for social FOMO, thereby exceeding the minimum criterion of 0.50 and confirming adequate convergent validity for all constructs. Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell-Larcker criterion (Fornell & Larcker, 1981).

Table 1 Reliability and Convergent Validity Measures

Variables	Item	Standardized factor loading	CR	AVE	Cronbach's Alpha
Direct Negative Customer Engagement	DNCE1	0.761	0.867	0.588	0.861
	DNCE2	0.755			
	DNCE3	0.783			
	DNCE4	0.801			
	DNCE5	0.755			
	DNCE6	0.745			
Remunerative Content	RC1	0.855	0.782	0.696	0.782
	RC2	0.822			
	RC3	0.826			
Relational Content	SC1	0.802	0.878	0.617	0.875
	SC2	0.819			
	SC3	0.753			
	SC4	0.77			
	SC5	0.821			
	SC6	0.743			
Social FOMO	SFOMO1	0.819	0.869	0.717	0.868
	SFOMO2	0.866			
	SFOMO3	0.854			
	SFOMO4	0.846			
Social Media Fatigue	SMF1	0.731	0.888	0.681	0.882
	SMF2	0.855			
	SMF3	0.869			
	SMF4	0.822			
	SMF5	0.841			

As reported in Table 2, the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than its corresponding inter-construct correlations, providing evidence of satisfactory discriminant validity. Taken together, these results provide robust empirical support for the reliability and construct validity of the measurement model. Accordingly, the model is deemed methodologically sound and suitable for subsequent structural model analysis.

Table 2 Discriminant Validity

	DNCE	RC	SC	SFOMO	SMF
DNCE	0.767				
RC	0.408	0.835			
SC	0.391	0.514	0.785		
SFOMO	0.348	0.411	0.401	0.847	
SMF	0.449	0.380	0.377	0.497	0.825

Notes: DNCE = Direct Negative Customer Engagement; RC = Remunerative Content; SC = Relational Content; SFOMO = Social FOMO; SMF = Social Media Fatigue

The structural model was evaluated using key criteria commonly recommended in PLS-SEM research, including the coefficient of determination (R^2), effect sizes (f^2), and variance inflation factors (VIF) (Hair et al., 2014). The results indicate that the model explains 21.8% of the variance in social FOMO, 24.7% in social media fatigue, and 20.2% in DNCE, suggesting a moderate level of explanatory power for all endogenous constructs. Effect size analysis further reveals that remunerative content and relational content exert small yet meaningful effects on

social FOMO ($f^2 = 0.073$ and 0.063 , respectively). In contrast, social FOMO has a medium effect on social media fatigue ($f^2 = 0.328$), whereas social media fatigue has a medium effect on direct negative customer engagement ($f^2 = 0.253$). Multicollinearity was assessed using variance inflation factors, and all VIF values were well below the conservative threshold of 3.3, indicating no multicollinearity concerns (Kock & Lynn, 2012). These findings provide support for the adequacy of the structural model and confirm its suitability for hypothesis testing.

The structural model was evaluated using SmartPLS through a nonparametric bootstrapping procedure. The estimated standardized path coefficients (β), along with their corresponding t -values and p -values, are reported in Table 3. The results indicate that remunerative content exerts a positive and statistically significant effect on social FOMO ($\beta = 0.278$, $t = 6.237$, $p < 0.001$), thereby providing empirical support for H1. Likewise, relational content has a significant positive influence on social FOMO ($\beta = 0.259$, $t = 6.571$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H2. As hypothesized, social FOMO significantly predicts social media fatigue ($\beta = 0.497$, $t = 13.931$, $p < 0.001$), thus supporting H3. Furthermore, social media fatigue has a positive and statistically significant effect on direct negative customer engagement ($\beta = 0.449$, $t = 10.686$, $p < 0.001$), supporting H4. Taken together, all hypothesized direct relationships are statistically significant and consistent with the proposed theoretical directions. These findings provide robust empirical evidence for a sequential mechanism whereby exposure to social media content contributes to social FOMO, subsequently intensifies social media fatigue, and ultimately leads to direct negative customer engagement.

Table 3 Testing Results for the Direct Relationships

	Path coefficient (β)	Standard deviation	t statistics	p values
RC -> SFOMO	0.278	0.045	6.237	0.000
SC -> SFOMO	0.259	0.039	6.571	0.000
SFOMO -> SMF	0.497	0.036	13.931	0.000
SMF -> DNCE	0.449	0.042	10.686	0.000

Notes: DNCE = Direct Negative Customer Engagement; RC = Remunerative Content; SC = Relational Content; SFOMO = Social FOMO; SMF = Social Media Fatigue

To further examine the indirect relationships proposed in H5 and H6, a mediation analysis was conducted using a nonparametric bootstrapping procedure in SmartPLS. The estimates of the specific indirect effects are presented in Table 4. The results reveal that remunerative content has a positive and statistically significant indirect effect on direct negative customer engagement through the sequential mediation of social FOMO and social media fatigue ($\beta = 0.062$, $t = 4.653$, $p < 0.001$), thereby providing empirical support for H5. Similarly, relational content exhibits a significant indirect effect on direct negative customer engagement via the same serial mediation pathway ($\beta = 0.058$, $t = 4.981$, $p < 0.001$), lending support to H6. Overall, these findings substantiate the proposed serial mediation mechanism, demonstrating that social FOMO mediates the effects of social media content characteristics on direct negative customer engagement, and, subsequently, on social media fatigue.

Table 4 Test Results for the Serial Mediating Role of Social FOMO and Social Media Fatigue

	Path coefficient (β)	Standard deviation	<i>t</i> statistics	<i>p</i> values
RC -> SFOMO -> SMF -> DNCE	0.062	0.013	4.653	0.000
SC -> SFOMO -> SMF -> DNCE	0.058	0.012	4.981	0.000

Notes: DNCE = Direct Negative Customer Engagement; RC = Remunerative Content; SC = Relational Content; SFOMO = Social FOMO; SMF = Social Media Fatigue.

Conclusion and Discussion

This study extends the SSO framework into the context of social media marketing by demonstrating how distinct content strategies can paradoxically generate negative customer engagement through emotional and cognitive mechanisms. The findings reveal that both remunerative and relational content, which are typically regarded as engagement-enhancing, may function as psychological stressors that evoke emotional strain and reactive behaviors among users.

First, the results confirm that both remunerative and relational content significantly intensify users' social fear of missing out. While prior research has largely emphasized interpersonal or social-comparison-based antecedents of FOMO (e.g., Whelan et al., 2020; Przybylski et al., 2013), this study advances existing knowledge by showing that promotion-oriented, utilitarian content can elicit comparable levels of psychological anxiety. This suggests that perceived scarcity, exclusivity, and social relevance embedded in marketing messages serve as emotional cues that activate FOMO, regardless of whether the content appeals to utilitarian or relational motives.

Second, consistent with Conservation of Resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), the findings demonstrate that social FOMO operates as a chronic emotional stressor that depletes users' psychological resources and culminates in social media fatigue. The sustained vigilance required to monitor time-sensitive or socially salient content progressively drains users' cognitive and affective capacity, fostering exhaustion and detachment from brand-related communications.

Third, the study provides empirical evidence that social media fatigue is a strong predictor of direct negative customer engagement, including complaints, public criticism, and brand avoidance. In line with recent research highlighting the dark side of customer engagement (Hollebeek et al., 2023), these findings indicate that fatigue does not merely attenuate engagement but may instead transform into active resistance. Such retaliatory responses pose a direct threat to brand-consumer relationships by converting emotional exhaustion into overt behavioral opposition.

The findings of this study offer important theoretical insights by extending the SSO framework from platform-level stressors to content-level stressors embedded in remunerative and relational social media messages. By conceptualizing social fear of missing out as an emotional strain and social media fatigue as a subsequent state of psychological depletion, the study empirically demonstrates a dual serial mediation mechanism linking content exposure to customer backlash. This extended application reveals that emotional exhaustion not only dampens engagement intensity but can also escalate into reactive and oppositional responses toward brands. Consequently, this research advances the dark-side engagement literature by showing that efforts to intensify interaction can paradoxically erode brand-consumer relationships through cumulative emotional overload. From a managerial perspective, this research underscores the importance of balancing persuasive intensity with emotional sustainability. The results highlight that effective social media engagement extends beyond

maximizing exposure or interactivity. Rather than relying on urgency or overwhelming content, firms should design strategies that engage users while safeguarding their psychological well-being and recognizing the emotional limits of persuasive communication. By foregrounding emotional sustainability as a core design principle, this study provides a more ethically responsible and strategically resilient approach to cultivating long-term brand equity and maintaining user trust in increasingly saturated digital environments.

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