Exploring the dark side of continuous social media brand community participation on consumer psychological ill-being: initial vs sustained participation

ABSTRACT

Purpose – This study explores the dark side effects of continuous social media brand community (SMBC) participation on consumer psychological ill-being.

Methodology – A two-wave online quantitative survey was conducted over a 12-month period, involving 805 consumers with prior experience participating in social media brand communities. The proposed model was analyzed using structural equation modeling (SEM) with AMOS 26.0.

Findings **–** The research indicates that individuals using social media for escapism are significantly linked to their SMBC participation and the experience of social media fatigue. Over time, participation in SMBC was found to greatly influence both social media fatigue and information overload. Notably, while negative emotions were closely tied to consumer psychological ill-being, information overload did not exhibit the same connection. Additionally, social media fatigue served as a mediator between SMBC participation and negative emotions. Similarly, negative emotions acted as a mediator between social media fatigue and psychological ill-being.

Research limitations/implications **–** This research examined the dark side of using social media as an escape and continuous participation in SMBC, employing a two-wave quantitative methodology. The study was confined to brand communities on the Facebook platform. This presents a limitation in terms of the broader applicability of the findings, as the analysis did not encompass a comprehensive range of social media platforms.

Practical implications **–** The study highlights the importance of managers maintaining order and promoting an environment of fairness on social media platforms to minimize negative emotions and reduce tensions among users. Additionally, governments can collaborate with social marketing agencies and NGOs to raise awareness about the potential adverse effects of excessive social media use, particularly focusing on protecting young people who are more susceptible to its negative impacts.

Originality **–** This research stands out as one of the few studies examining the potential negative aspects of SMBC activities, offering a meaningful addition to the existing body of literature on SMBC and psychological ill-being. Grounded in the Theory of Compensatory Internet Use (TCIU) and the Stressor-Strain-Outcome (SSO) model, it provides valuable insights into the darker side of consumer social media escapism and participation in SMBCs, particularly in relation to their psychological ill-being.

Keywords: Social Media; Brand Community Participation; Escapism, Consumer Psychological Ill-being; Information Overload; Longitudinal Research

1. Introduction

The digital age has prompted varied responses from individuals, organizations, and governments. One notable reaction is the widespread use of social media for connecting with family, friends, and brands (Hinson *et al.*, 2024). Globally, over 4.26 billion people actively use social media, a figure anticipated to grow to nearly 6 billion by 2027 (Statista, 2024). Social networking platforms, fueled by rapid technological advancements, have fundamentally reshaped consumers' daily routines and behaviors (Hollebeek *et al.*, 2019). Many users also turn to social media as a coping mechanism, seeking to escape daily pressures and challenges (McLean *et al.*, 2022; Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2023). In this regard, social media escapism is defined as the desire to escape the harsh realities and worries of life by immersing oneself in social media activities (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004). In emerging markets such as Ghana, this pattern is pronounced, as individuals spend an average of 203 minutes daily on social media (NorvanReports, 2024), which is considerably higher than the global average of 143 minutes (Statista, 2024), primarily to consume content and engage with others.

The growing interplay between technology usage and consumer ill-being has become increasingly contentious. While the use of technology, including social media, can enhance consumer well-being, it can also contribute to psychological ill-being, described by McLean *et al.* (2025) as a "double-edged sword". Their research highlights that while businesses often promote technology to drive customer interaction and mutual value creation, its potential adverse effects of consumer psychological ill-being are frequently overlooked. For instance, excessive use of social media is often linked to potential consumer ill-being (Dhir *et al.*, 2018). However, could participation in social media brand community (SMBC) platforms also yield psychological ill-being? Unlike general social media usage, which involves diverse and unstructured activities (Kietzmann *et al.*, 2011), engagement in SMBCs is more deliberate, driven by shared brand loyalty and strong connections to both the brand and its community of users (Veloutsou and Liao, 2023).

Social media escapism can influence participation in SMBCs (Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2023), but it is not always regarded as a beneficial form of media engagement (McLean *et al.*, 2022; Stenseng *et al.*, 2021), as it may contribute to consumer's psychological ill-being (Barnes *et al.*, 2019). Psychological ill-being is defined as a consumer's "experience of negative affect and explicit psychological malfunction, such as emotional and physical exhaustion" (Swar *et al.*, 2017, p. 417). While psychological well-being is associated with positive emotional states

like happiness, enthusiasm, and motivation, psychological ill-being encompasses adverse emotions such as anxiety, anger, and depression (Stebbings *et al.*, 2012; Swar *et al.*, 2017). Engaging in social media escapism can lead to social media fatigue, which may negatively lead to psychological ill-being (Kaur *et al.*, 2021). Dhir *et al.* (2018, p. 141) define social media fatigue "as a situation whereby social media users suffer from mental exhaustion after experiencing various technological, informative and communicative overloads through their participation and interactions on the different online social media platforms". Previous studies on SMBC participation have primarily focused on its positive aspects (e.g., Habibi *et al.*, 2014; Machado *et al.*, 2019), and have overlooked its potential downsides. While excessive social media use has been linked to fatigue and exhaustion (Dhir *et al.*, 2018; Yu *et al.*, 2018), could sustained participation in SMBC activities lead to fatigue, information overload, negative emotions, and ultimately consumer psychological ill-being? Little is known of the potential effects of SMBC participation (given its peculiar nature and focus) on consumer psychological ill-being over a sustained period.

There have been increasing appeals for research to explore how participation in SMBCs influences consumer ill-being (e.g., McLean *et al.*, 2022; Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2023; Ostrom *et al.*, 2021). For example, Kaur *et al.* (2021) emphasize the need to investigate the role of negative emotions arising from SMBC participation and their impact on consumer psychological distress. SMBC platforms have the potential to create negative emotions and conflicts among community members (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). Dhir *et al.* (2018) highlight the importance of gaining deeper insights into the relationship between social media fatigue and consumer psychological ill-being. Accordingly, studies exploring the dark side of SMBC participation driven by social media escapism are scarce in the extant literature. Hence, employing a two-wave quantitative survey research approach, this study explores the dark side effects of continuous SMBC participation on consumer psychological ill-being through the lenses of the theory of compensatory Internet use (TCIU) and stressor-strain-outcome model (SSO).

This study aims to address the following specific research objectives: first, to investigate the relationship between social media escapism, continuous SMBC participation, and social media fatigue. Second, to explore how continuous participation in SMBC influences social media fatigue and information overload. Third, to analyze the direct and mediating roles of information overload and negative emotions in shaping consumer psychological ill-being. The research posits that as consumers engage in social media escapism and actively participate in

SMBC, sustained involvement may lead to information overload, fatigue, and negative emotions, which in turn could contribute to their psychological ill-being.

This study contributes significantly to the literature on social media and consumer psychological ill-being by applying the theoretical frameworks of the Theory of Compensatory Internet Use (TCIU) and the Stressor-Strain-Outcome (SSO) model. By integrating these models, the research provides valuable insights into the darker aspects of social media escapism and SMBC participation. Utilizing a two-wave quantitative survey approach, it offers a nuanced understanding of how these behaviors relate to consumer psychological ill-being. Second, this research responds to Ostrom *et al.* (2021) and McLean *et al.* (2025), to investigate how technology use impact on consumer psychological ill-being. This study contends that consumers continuous SMBC participation indirectly impacts on their psychological ill-being over a sustained period, and hence, makes a significant contribution to the literature on technology and ill-being. Third, theoretically, this study extends the frameworks of the TCIU and the SSO model by highlighting the long-term effects of continuous SMBC participation on psychological ill-being. It underscores the importance of considering temporal dynamics and SMBC stressors in understanding the pathways leading to psychological ill-being. These extensions provide a richer, more comprehensive framework for studying the impacts of continuous SMBC participation on consumer psychological ill-being. Fourth, this study supports the findings of Dhir *et al.* (2018) suggesting that social media fatigue contributes to psychological ill-being by amplifying negative emotions, which can lead to symptoms of anxiety and depression. Expanding on their work, this research contends that the negative emotions encountered on SMBC platforms exacerbate consumer psychological ill-being. Finally, addressing the concerns raised by Kaur *et al.* (2021), this study proposes that prolonged engagement in SMBC activities could indirectly result in psychological ill-being, whereas the anticipated effects of information overload on consumers show no significant impact.

The subsequent sections outline the theoretical framework underpinning the study, culminating in the formulation of hypotheses. This is followed by a detailed explanation of the research methodology, the presentation of analysis, and the study's findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of the results, an exploration of the study's implications, and a consideration of its limitations along with suggestions for future research.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 The Theory of Compensatory Internet Use (TCIU)

The Compensatory Internet Use Theory (CIUT) proposes that individuals turn to online social platforms to manage challenging emotions and difficult situations they experience (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). The theory's logical form suggests that it can be applied to nearly any sort of media or technology use. This study advances the theory of compensatory Internet use which posits that individuals may be driven to utilize the Internet as a means of alleviating stress triggered by challenging life events (Wang *et al.*, 2015b).

The core idea of the compensatory Internet use theory is that individuals address their adverse life situations through their engagement with specific Internet tools (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). In this vein, if an individual experiences a lack of social engagement in everyday life, they may be motivated to use an application that offers social interaction, like an Internet game or a social media platform. TCIU highlights that increasing use of the Internet could have both beneficial and adverse effects on an individual. For instance, it could be beneficial if the person receives the desired social gratification and feels better. On the other hand, it could have adverse effects if the person becomes fatigued due to processing the information received, which over time could result in psychological ill-being. Alt and Boniel-Nissim (2018) highlight that excessive Internet use and heavy involvement in online activities can lead to detrimental effects on a person's well-being. Similarly, Kardefelt-Winther (2014) emphasizes how this theory sheds light on escapism through social media and its possible harmful impacts on users. Therefore, utilizing TCIU as the foundational theory for this study is appropriate for exploring the dark side of social media escapism.

2.2 The Stressor-Strain-Outcome Model (SSO)

This study combines the stressor-strain-outcome (SSO) model with TCIU. Although TCIU is the primary framework guiding this research, we contend that the stressors and strains arising from social media escapism and continuous SMBC participation could result in negative consequences such as consumers' psychological ill-being. The SSO model provides a framework for studying stress by exploring the relationships between stress-inducing factors (stressors), reactions to stress (strains), and the effects of those reactions (outcomes). This framework has been utilized in research on social media (e.g., Dhir *et al.*, 2018).

Koeske and Koeske (1993) further elaborate on the SSO model, detailing how stress, strain, and resulting outcomes are interconnected. Here, stress is defined as the "environmental stimuli (objective events) that are perceived and interpreted by the actor as troublesome and potentially disruptive" (Koeske and Koeske, 1993, p. 111). Although continuous participation in SMBC may not initially seem troublesome to the consumer, it requires constant attention to stay informed and avoid feeling left out – this can act as an indirect stressor. Strain, in this context, refers to the "disruptive impacts on actor concentration, physiology, and emotion, i.e., negative reactions tied to situational stimuli" (Koeske and Koeske, 1993, p. 111). It represents an individual's response to continuous, context-specific stress (Baltes and Heydens-Gahir, 2003). Such context specific stress could be evidenced in consumers continuous SMBC participation that could lead to strains such as fatigue, negative emotions, and information overload.

Engaging in SMBCs over a sustained period can place strain on individuals, leading to unfavorable outcomes. For example, social media stimuli, such as ongoing participation in SMBCs, are likely to cause strains that result in negative consequences (Cao *et al.*, 2018). According to the SSO framework, we propose that the strains arising from continuous SMBC participation, such as fatigue, negative emotions, and information overload, will negatively impact on consumers leading to a potential psychological ill-being. Integrating the SSO framework with the TCIU theory is crucial, as increased involvement with SMBC platforms can evolve from compensatory usage into experiences of strain, such as feelings of fatigue or being exhausted, ultimately leading to adverse effects. (Sweller, 2011). Accordingly, this integration offers a thorough framework and gives prominence to the influence of social media escapism on SMBC interactions and the resulting outcomes on consumer psychological ill-being.

2.3 Social Media Escapism

Escapism involves a psychological process where emotion and cognition combine, allowing a person to mentally detach from the present and focus on an alternative reality (Green *et al.*, 2004). Research highlights that many individuals engage with social media to connect with others or brands as a temporary escape from their current circumstances (Mathwick and Rigdon, 2004; Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2023). Some researchers argue that escapism motivates people to consume entertainment media (Klimmt, 2008), explore virtual reality vacations (McLean *et al.*, 2023), and participate in SMBC activities (Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2023). McLean *et al.* (2022) note that mobile apps enable users to enter a state of flow and

momentarily escape daily pressures, providing immediate gratification. However, the extensive use of such apps has raised concerns about addiction and their potential negative effects on mental health (Barnes *et al.*, 2019). This phenomenon has led to the concept of "regrettable escapism," described by McLean et al (2022, p.162) as “the regret experienced by an individual when escaping from the self both in a psychological and physiological level through intensified media exposure as a result of certain deficits or needs such as stress relief, entertainment, information seeking or interest”.

This study examines the influence of social media escapism on heightened participation in SMBC activities and its potential effects on consumer psychological ill-being. Drawing from the TCIU, Kardefelt-Winther (2014) suggests that compensatory social media use can lead to excessive technology engagement and adverse outcomes. In an effort to escape the challenges of daily life, consumers turn to social media escapism, engaging in various activities such as interacting with friends, content, and brands (Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2023). Does this pattern of escapism contribute to increased SMBC participation, social media fatigue, and ultimately lead to consumer psychological ill-being?

2.4 Social Media Brand Community (SMBC)

Muniz Jr and O'guinn (2001, p. 412) define an online brand community (OBC) is “a specialized, non-geographically bound community based on a structured system of social ties among enthusiasts of a brand”. These communities often exhibit shared consciousness, rituals, traditions, and moral responsibility. OBCs have grown in popularity, enabling members to exchange brand-related information, share experiences, and connect with others who share their interests (Veloutsou and Liao, 2023). For businesses, they serve as an effective strategy to boost customer engagement (Habibi *et al.*, 2014; Hollebeek, 2018).

Social media has expanded this concept into social media-based brand communities (SMBCs), defined as boundary-free, digital spaces designed to encourage interaction and build relationships among brand enthusiasts (Jibril *et al.*, 2019). SMBCs may be corporation-led, created by firms to promote positive customer attitudes, or customer-led, initiated by users to share experiences and support the brand (Kang *et al.*, 2016). In effect, SMBCs are groups of self-selected individuals that use digital gadgets to interact with the brand and others who share common interest (Hennig-Thurau *et al.*, 2004). These communities, evolving from simple text forums, now offer dynamic platforms for collaboration, adding value to brands (Akrout and Nagy, 2018). Such participatory behaviors indicate a deeper level of consumer-brand

interaction that extends beyond passive consumption and positions consumers as active co-creators within social media brand communities (Veloutsou and Liao, 2023). As an example, MTN Ghana, a leading telecom operator, leverages its SMBC to update members on product launches, resolve customer inquiries, and gather valuable insights. In turn, community members benefit from direct interactions, receiving feedback and support from both brand representatives and fellow users within the platform.

Participants in SMBCs typically exhibit varying levels of engagement, which can be categorized as consuming, contributing, or creating behaviors (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011). Consuming refers to passive content viewing, contributing involves actions such as commenting or sharing, while creating reflects the highest level of activity through the production of original brand-related content. While prior research has focused on these distinct forms of engagement, this study shifts attention to the continuous and sustained participation in SMBCs—regardless of specific engagement type—and its potential adverse effects on consumers' psychological ill-being. Specifically, we examine how sustained involvement in SMBCs may contribute to negative psychological outcomes, including fatigue, information overload, and ill-being.

Accordingly, SMBC participation can lead to increased purchase intent and subjective well-being (Habibi *et al.*, 2014). However, it may also carry risks, including emotional and psychological strain (Sweller, 2011). Studies link heavy social media use to issues like fatigue, anxiety, and depression (Primack *et al.*, 2017). Could similar effects be attributed to continuous SMBC participation over a sustained period? Within SMBCs, such fatigue may arise from the pressure to stay engaged or from emotionally charged interactions (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005; Bright *et al.*, 2015). Despite research on SMBC motivations and management, there is limited understanding of their potential negative impacts on participants' psychological ill-being due to prolonged participation.

2.5 Consumer Psychological Ill-being

For a sustained period of time, scholars have noted that marketing has a significant impact on consumer well-being as it has a direct impact on consumer life domain satisfaction (experiences related to the marketplace) (Lee and Sirgy, 1995). In exploring the dark side of social media escapism practices, this study focuses on consumer psychological ill-being which has received less attention in the extant literature. Integrating the assumptions of TCIU (Kardefelt-Winther,

2014) and SSO model (Koeske and Koeske, 1993), we posit that as consumers use social media escapism to cope with life's unpleasant issues, increased and continuous participation in SMBC activities could impact their psychological ill-being. Psychological ill-being encompasses mental and emotional strain, including symptoms such as anxiety, depression, frustration, and emotional exhaustion, often emerging when essential psychological needs are neglected (Stebbings *et al.*, 2012). Drawing from this conceptualization, and in line with Dhir *et al.* (2018), this study measures psychological ill-being as unpleasant emotions including anxiety and depression. According to Dhir *et al.* (2018), depression is an emotional state void of or reduced pleasurable emotions; and anxiety is defined as a prevalent uneasy mindset that is worried about upcoming stressful circumstances or threats. Indeed, Ryff *et al.* (2006) revealed that psychological ill-being acknowledges the greater dimension of negative affect, depressive symptoms, trait anxiety, and trait rage an individual is exposed to.

Despite the fact that using social media may help fulfil certain individuals' requirements and thus their well-being, previous findings suggest that the level of Internet usage may be associated with increased psychological ill-being (Abi-Jaoude *et al.*, 2020). Studies that took generational patterns into account found a correlation between rising Internet engagement (especially among teenagers and young adults) and mental trauma, depression symptoms, and suicidal behavior consequences (Twenge *et al.*, 2019). Other studies on social media and Internet use have examined deficiencies like depression and anxiety (Dhir *et al.*, 2018), low self-esteem (Fioravanti *et al.*, 2012), high sensation-seeking (Armstrong *et al.*, 2000), and loneliness, shyness, and locus of control (Caplan, 2002; Chak and Leung, 2004).

From the above, it is argued that escaping from realities of everyday life to immerse oneself in social media practices could result in fatigue and other negative consequences such as consumer psychological ill-being. Accordingly, can participation in continuous SMBC activities and social media fatigue result in consumers' psychological ill-being as a result of information overload and negative emotions? Figure 1 shows the proposed research model as discussed in our model development section.

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2.6 Hypothesized model development

2.6.1 Social media escapism and participation in SMBC

Addis and Holbrook (2010) suggest that individuals often seek refuge from real-life challenges by psychologically immersing themselves in social media activities. Building on this, TCIU posits that individuals turn to the internet, including social media, to cope with negative life situations and emotional states (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). This escape mechanism may, however, trigger a self-reinforcing cycle, where short-term stress relief promotes habitual engagement over time (Brand *et al.*, 2016), deepening involvement in SMBC activities (Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2023).

Indeed, individuals are motivated to join or engage in SMBCs for a variety of reasons including information, entertainment, compensation, personal identification, integration, social contact, and empowerment (Muntinga *et al.*, 2011). Since social media is a destination for escapism tendencies, individuals who seek gratification from social media are likely to participate in SMBCs for self-identification, entertainment, connectedness learning, information, and knowledge development (Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2020). From the above, we can infer that users who turn to social media to escape reality are more likely to become regular and frequent participants of SMBC activities. Accordingly, this study hypothesizes that continuous SMBC participation are also destinations of social media escapism. Thus, the research hypothesis, over a 12-month period:

> *H1: Social media escapism over a sustained period (vs. initial phase) will have a significant positive influence on continued SMBC participation.*

2.6.2 Social media escapism and social media fatigue

As consumers immerse themselves in social media activities through social media escapism, there is high possibility of becoming fatigued given the time spent on such platforms (Kaur *et al.*, 2021). Al-Nabhani *et al.* (2022) explain that "encountering escapism may result in guilt", while McLean et al (2022) consider escapism as regrettable. Based on TCIU, an individual's response to unfavorable life circumstances is to find solace in using technological applications (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). However, Wang *et al.* (2015a) argue that excessive social media use resulting from social media escaping from the realities of life may be associated with increased consumer's psychological ill-being. Indeed, this compensatory behavior, while initially providing relief, can lead to overuse and dependency (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014).

Integrating TCIU and the SSO model, we argue that while social media may provide temporary escape, its overuse can introduce stressors that lead to strains, and ultimately resulting in fatigue. Zhang *et al.* (2016) contend that users who frequently turn to social media to escape their problems eventually experience diminished satisfaction and increased fatigue. Hence, this study contends that social media escapism over a period could result in social media fatigue. Thus, the research hypothesis, over a 12-month period:

> *H2: Social media escapism over a sustained period (vs. initial phase) will result in social media fatigue.*

2.6.3 SMBC participation, social media fatigue, and information overload

The evolving dynamic platforms of online brand communities provide avenues for consumers to actively interact with brands and multiple actors concurrently (Akrout and Nagy, 2018). Here, consumers are exposed to an abundance of information and other community behaviors that could result in feelings of exhaustion (Akrout and Nagy, 2018; Sweller, 2011). As users increasingly rely on SMBCs to escape from stress, they may develop patterns of excessive use. Whereas excessive social media use could result in fatigue (Dhir *et al.*, 2018), it is not clear whether continuous participation in SMBC activities could lead to social media fatigue. Initially, participation in SMBC activities could offer emotional relief and a sense of belonging, but over time, this compensatory behavior could lead to overuse and introduce strain that manifests in fatigue (Yu *et al.*, 2018). In line with Bright *et al.* (2015), this study extends that prolonged participation in SMBC activities can lead to social media fatigue. Here, individuals who use social media (for brand interaction activities) may become exhausted as a result of overstimulation (Shokouhyar *et al.*, 2018). Hence, participation in SMBC continuously over a sustained period could lead to social media fatigue. Therefore, over a 12-month period:

> *H3: Continuous SMBC participation over a sustained period (vs. initial phase) will result in social media fatigue.*

Continuous participation in SMBC introduces stressors such as the constant flow of information, the need to stay updated, and the pressure to engage with content (Maier *et al.*, 2015). Herhausen *et al.* (2019) note that participants may be confronted with the information overload that typically characterizes communication exchanges on SMBC platforms. Here, the continuous stream of updates and notifications in SMBCs could contribute to information overload (Lin and Wang, 2023). On such platforms, consumers are likely to encounter a variety

of overflows, including information overload, social overload, and system feature overload (Fu *et al.*, 2020; Whelan *et al.*, 2020). As a result, participants may be overwhelmed with so much information over a sustained period leading to the burden of information overload. Yu *et al.* (2018, p. 1096) define information overload "as a situation when individuals are presented with a large amount of information generated on social media, which exceeds the capacity they can process". It is argued that continuous participation in SMBC activities could result in information overload on active community platforms (Sweller, 2011) following various discussion and contributions. This study proposes, over a 12-month period:

> *H4: Continuous SMBC participation over a sustained period (vs. initial phase) will result in information overload.*

2.6.4 Social Media Fatigue (SMF) and Negative Emotions

Social media fatigue is considered to be harmful to both users and service providers (Ou *et al.*, 2023). In addition, social media fatigue is closely linked to issues of consumers' physical and mental health, which leads to more bad or unhealthy behaviors (Zheng and Ling, 2021) exhibited on social media platforms including brand communities. In this instance, negative emotions are considered a manifestation of social media fatigue (Sheng *et al.*, 2023). We define negative emotions as participants' negative valence of emotional experiences retrieved from prior interactions with other participants on SMBC platforms (Ou and Verhoef, 2017).

Social media fatigue could lead to unhealthy behaviors (Sheng *et al.*, 2023; Zheng and Ling, 2021) on SMBC platforms which are likely to induce negative emotions as participants spend more time on such platforms. Drawing on SSO model (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014), social media fatigue is a strain that results from continuous SMBC participation stressors, and in turn triggers negative emotions. Social media fatigue can cause feelings of frustration, stress, envy, loneliness, and overwhelm (Bright *et al.*, 2015) which could expose participants to negative interactions. Accordingly, this study argues that while consumers become fatigued for spending more time on SMBC platforms, this psychological strain could trigger negative comments or incidents that could trigger negative emotions on others. This study proposes, over a 12-month period:

> *H5: Social media fatigue emanating from continuous SMBC participation over a sustained period (vs. initial phase) will result in negative emotions.*

Conceptually, following the hypothesized effect of continuous SMBC participation on the customer's social media fatigue (H3), and the effects of social media fatigue on users' negative

emotions (H5), the continuous SMBC participation is expected to have significant indirect effects on customer negative emotions. In effect, while continuous SMBC participation may trigger social media fatigue, this in turn could be manifested on the platform in a form of negative emotions likely to be experienced by others (Sheng *et al.*, 2023). The presence of a potential significant indirect effect indicates mediation as suggested by Zhao *et al.* (2010). Based on the assumptions of SSO model (Koeske and Koeske, 1993), we argue that the fatigue experienced from overuse and other stressors from the SMBC platforms could lead to emotional exhaustion, which triggers negative emotions (Bright *et al.*, 2015). On this premise, this study proposes that social media fatigue will mediate the effect of continuous SMBC participation on consumer negative emotions over a sustained period. Thus, the research hypothesizes, following consumers' continuous SMBC participation over a 12-month period:

> *H5b: A consumer's social media fatigue over a sustained period (vs. initial phase) will significantly mediate a possibility of consumers' continuous SMBC participation to trigger negative emotions.*

2.6.5 Information Overload, Negative Emotions, and Psychological Ill-being

Ryff *et al.* (2006) conceptualize psychological ill-being in their study as a multidimensional construct consisting of depressive and anxiety symptoms. In a related study, Swar *et al.* (2017) found that information overload results in consumer psychological ill-being in a form of depression and anxiety. From the SSO model, the strain from information overload could disrupt cognitive processes, leading to mental fatigue and impaired functioning, which can result in negative thought patterns and emotional distress, contributing to both depression and anxiety (LaRose *et al.*, 2003). Lin and Wang (2023) highlight that when consumers are exposed to excessive product information beyond their cognitive capacity, they may experience information overload, which disrupts effective information processing and reduces engagement in online brand communities. Similarly, as individuals increasingly turn to social media brand communities (SMBCs) for compensatory internet use, prolonged and deep immersion in these activities has been linked to adverse psychological outcomes (Alt and Boniel-Nissim, 2018), such as depression and anxiety.

In this study, we explore how information overload resulting from increased SMBC participation could lead to customer psychological ill-being in the form of depression and anxiety. Accordingly, the mediating effect of information overload on the relationship between continuous SMBC participation and psychological ill-being is also examined. Drawing on the

SSO model, we propose that prolonged exposure to large volumes of information within SMBCs acts as a stressor, where information overload contributes to negative psychological outcomes and ill-being. The argument is grounded on the premise that information overload generated on the SMBC platform would affect an individual's psychological mental state (Sweller, 2011), which in turn amplifies the effect of continuous SMBC participation on depression and anxiety. Thus, the research hypothesis, over a 12-month period:

> *H6: Information overload over a sustained period (vs. initial phase) will result in (a) depression, (b) anxiety.*
>
> *H6: Information overload over a sustained period (vs. initial phase) will mediate the relationship between continuous SMBC participation and (c) depression, (d) anxiety.*

Responses from participants on SMBC platforms could generate strong normative tensions on the brand community platform that may trigger some negative emotions from the community members (Algesheimer *et al.*, 2005). TCIU posits that consumers use Internet-based social media platforms as a coping means of dealing with the unpleasant circumstances and feelings they encounter (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014). As a result, encountering other negative incidents on such platforms could impact negatively on the participant. Negative emotions are those such as anger, fear, shame, and sadness, which sometimes make individuals feel offended and disappointed (Smith and Bolton, 2002). Hence, these negative emotions could impact on consumers' psychological ill-being over a sustained period.

In a related study, Fox and Moreland (2015) found that, despite regularly experiencing unpleasant emotions, Facebook users often feel compelled to remain active on the platform due to a fear of missing out and the social expectation to maintain interpersonal connections. Building on this insight, the current study contends that the negative emotions emerging from sustained social media fatigue within SMBC platforms may exacerbate underlying tensions, ultimately contributing to consumer psychological ill-being, specifically manifesting as depression and anxiety. Consistent with Dhir et al. (2018), who demonstrated that social media fatigue can directly impact psychological ill-being, this study further argues that continued exposure to negative emotions within these communities may intensify such detrimental outcomes. Therefore, this study further argues that negative emotions experienced on social media and related interactive activities would mediate the relationship between social media fatigue and psychological ill-being. Thus, the research hypothesizes, over a 12-month period:

H7: Negative emotions over a sustained period (vs. initial phase) will result in (a) depression, (b) anxiety.

H7: Negative emotions over a sustained period (vs. initial phase) will mediate the relationship between social media fatigue and (c) depression, (d) anxiety.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Data collection and sampling

To achieve the research objectives of this study, a two-wave quantitative field survey was employed to gather data from selected consumers using social media and participating in SMBC platforms (e.g., Telecel Ghana, MTN Ghana, etc.) in Ghana. This approach allowed us to better understand the interplay between social media escapism and consumer psychological ill-being over a sustained period of 12 months. This research design enabled us to observe potential changes in participants' psychological ill-being over time while considering other psychosocial factors like fatigue, information overload, and negative emotions. We focused on Facebook given that 73.7% of the 8.8 million social media users in Ghana actively use this platform for various interactions (Statista, 2022). Secondly, most businesses have established brand community platforms on Facebook to engage with consumers. As noted by Osei-Frimpong et al. (2023), Ghana was selected due to its comparable social media usage trends with other emerging markets, with approximately 30% of the population actively engaging on social media platforms. Similar patterns are evident in countries such as South Africa and Nigeria, where individuals spend an average of 224 and 260 minutes daily on social media, respectively (NorvanReports, 2024). In these contexts, the widespread adoption of social media intersects with diverse cultural identities, shaping unique engagement behaviors (Hinson et al., 2024). Moreover, Ghana provides an important emerging market perspective, shaped by distinctive cultural, socio-economic, and technological dynamics (Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2019), which may influence how consumers interact with and are affected by brand community dynamics on social media platforms.

SMBCs were considered given that social media usage has increased greatly (Statista, 2024) leading to increased consumer curiosity and interaction with brand content, particularly among the youth, as a way to escape daily life realities. Using a convenience sampling method,

participants were recruited to complete an online survey. The questionnaire was designed by adapting validated scales from existing literature. Before conducting the main study, a pretest was carried out to ensure content and criterion validity. For this purpose, 50 participants from social media brand communities on platforms like Facebook (e.g., Telecel Ghana, MTN Ghana) were selected to complete the questionnaire. The pretest allowed for final refinements to the survey instrument after achieving satisfactory measures of content validity and reliability.

The main survey was conducted with the assistance of a market research firm, which facilitated participant recruitment for completing the questionnaire. To reach potential respondents, the link to the online survey was shared on the designated Facebook brand pages. Following McLean (2018), respondents who have followed such SMBC platforms for at least one month were selected to complete the questionnaire in the first instance. Following a two-wave survey research approach, data were collected twice from the same respondent. At Time 1 (T1), data were collected from 953 participants (434 Females, Mean Age = 27; 519 Males, Mean Age = 26). A second dataset was collected from 805 participants at Time 2 (T2) 11 months later (369 females, Mean age = 29; 436 males, Mean age = 28). In order to conduct direct comparisons between Time 1 and Time 2, we followed the procedure by Reinecke and Trepte (2014). Following Reinecke and Trepte (2014), no personally identifiable information of the respondents was stored to ensure participants' anonymity. To link participants' data across the two measurement points, respondents were instructed to create a unique identifier code during the first survey using specific components:

- The first two letters of their mother's first name,
- The last two letters of their father's first name,
- Two digits representing their birth month, and
- The last two letters of the city where they were born.

An example of how they created the identifier code was provided on the questionnaire. In the second survey, the respondents were asked to enter the same email address and identifier codes they provided in the previous survey. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, who were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time.

For data analysis, only participants whose data could be consistently matched across both times (T1 & T2) using their identifier codes (N = 805) were included. While data were collected from participants of different SMBC platforms, initial analysis did not show any significant

difference in the datasets. We summarize the descriptive statistics of respondents' characteristics in Table 1 below.

========= PLACE TABLE 1 HERE =========

3.2 Measures

Existing scales were adopted to measure the constructs in the research model. Minor modifications were made to the items to fit the context of the study. All items were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1, strongly disagree to 5, strongly agree), given that a five-point Likert scale is simple and easy to respond, and considered "safer" in studies that involve the general population (de Rezende and de Medeiros, 2022; Weijters *et al.*, 2010). A three-item scale was adapted from Kang *et al.* (2016) to measure SMBC participation, while another five-item scale was drawn from Kaur *et al.* (2021) to measure social media fatigue. Likewise, a three-item scale was adapted from Osei-Frimpong *et al.* (2023) to measure social media escapism. We used a three-item scale from Yu *et al.* (2018) to measure information overload. A three-item scale from Smith and Bolton (2002) was also used to measure negative emotions. Depression and Anxiety were each measured with a five-item scale from Dhir *et al.* (2018). Appendix 1 presents scale items adapted in this study and their factor loadings.

4.0 Data Analysis and Results

The dataset was initially screened, followed by a preliminary analysis to assess construct normality and reliability using SPSS 26.0. An exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was then carried out to address minor adjustments made to the scale items, utilizing principal component analysis with Varimax rotation. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy was calculated at 0.839, surpassing the acceptable threshold of 0.6, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity yielded a p-value of < .0001, confirming the suitability of the data for factor analysis. Building on the satisfactory results from the EFA, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted separately for the datasets from Time 1 and Time 2 using AMOS 26.0 with maximum likelihood estimation. The findings revealed no evidence of cross-loading across the two collection periods, ensuring the reliability of the factor structure. The CFA model evaluation presented the following fit indices, Time 1: $\chi^2_{(291)} = 1075.995$, p = .000, χ^2/df = 3.698, GFI = .923, AGFI = .905, CFI = .942, TLI = .930, RMSEA = .058, PCLOSE = .156;

and Time 2: $\chi^2_{(291)}$ = 1035.757, p = .000, χ^2/df = 3.559, GFI = .924, AGFI = .904, CFI = .946, TLI = .935, RMSEA = .056, PCLOSE = .159.

The items demonstrated reasonably high factor loadings, with composite reliability values exceeding 0.85. For internal consistency, a reliability threshold of 0.70 is typically deemed acceptable for all constructs. Additionally, the average variance extracted (AVE) values for the constructs surpassed the minimum threshold of 0.5. As shown in Tables 2a and 2b, the square root of the AVE for each construct was greater than the inter-construct correlations, and no evidence of cross-loadings was observed. Therefore, consistent with the criteria established by Fornell and Larcker (1981), the measurements meet the standards for both convergent and discriminant validity.

========= PLACE TABLES 2a AND 2b HERE =========

4.1 Common Method Bias

To address concerns of common method bias in the survey design, reverse-scored items were included in the main constructs to minimize acquiescence bias (Lindell and Whitney, 2001). Following data collection, Harman's one-factor test was used to evaluate common method variance by entering all key constructs into a principal component factor analysis. Common method bias is indicated when a single factor emerges or when one factor accounts for most covariance between independent and dependent variables. The results of Harman's test revealed the presence of multiple factors in the model, with the largest single factor explaining only 12.92% of the variance. In addition, a common latent factor (Podsakoff *et al.*, 2003), was introduced in AMOS 26.0 as an extension of the confirmatory factor analysis. This factor was linked to all indicators of the principal constructs in the model. The analysis showed that the primary constructs accounted for 0.51 of the variance, while the common latent factor explained only 0.11, with most coefficients being insignificant, suggesting no evidence of common method bias. Multicollinearity was further assessed using the variance inflation factor (VIF). The highest recorded VIF value was 1.842, well below the cut-off of 10 (Hair Jr *et al.*, 2014), confirming no violation of the multicollinearity assumption. Importantly, the results showed no substantial differences between the two datasets (T1 and T2).

Following the confirmatory factor analysis, longitudinal measurement invariance (Childs *et al.*, 2023) of the data was examined. This was done to establish the similarity or otherwise in the

regression loadings across the two waves of data (Vandenberg and Lance, 2000). The analysis confirmed measurement invariance, therefore, allowing for appropriate comparisons.

4.2 Structural Model Estimation Results

Using structural equation modelling (SEM) in AMOS 26.0, the full structural model was estimated. The model evaluation presented the following fit indices, **Time 1**: $\chi^2_{(38)} = 85.443$, p = .000, χ^2/df = 2.249, GFI = .983, AGFI = .966, CFI = .955, TLI = .922, RMSEA = .039, PCLOSE = .940; and **Time 2**: $\chi^2_{(38)} = 92.030$, p = .000, χ^2/df = 2.422, GFI = .982, AGFI = .963, CFI = .960, TLI = .930, RMSEA = .042, PCLOSE = .878. A detailed list of the standardized path coefficients with their respective t-values and R^2 for both Time 1 and Time 2 are presented in Table 3. It should be noted that the analysis for the data collected in Time 1 was reflected in the data for Time 2.

========= PLACE TABLE 3 HERE =========

4.3 Results

The findings provide strong support for several key hypotheses. In summary, the study highlights that prolonged social media fatigue contributes significantly to negative psychological outcomes, specifically elevated levels of depression and anxiety among consumers. These results underscore the cumulative adverse effects of ongoing involvement in SMBC activities on consumer psychological ill-being.

Gender, age, education, frequency of visits to SMBC platforms, and time spent on these platforms were included as control variables. As shown in Table 3, most of these variables had no significant effect on SMBC participation or social media fatigue and are therefore unlikely to influence the study's findings. However, age showed a significant association with SMBC participation, indicating that user age may impact participation levels (Time 1: $\beta = -0.122$, $p < 0.001$; Time 2: $\beta = 0.084$, $p < 0.05$). Additionally, while time spent on SMBC platforms did not significantly relate to social media fatigue at Time 1 ($\beta = 0.051$, $p > 0.05$), prolonged participation revealed a significant positive effect on fatigue at Time 2 ($\beta = 0.084$, $p < 0.05$). Furthermore, the analysis demonstrated that social media escapism had a strong positive correlation with both SMBC participation (Time 1: $\beta = 0.208$, $p < 0.001$; Time 2: $\beta = 0.325$, $p < 0.001$) and social media fatigue (Time 1: $\beta = 0.121$, $p < 0.001$; Time 2: $\beta = 0.324$, $p < 0.001$).

These findings suggest that while escapism motivates consumers to engage in SMBC activities, it also contributes to increased fatigue over time.

The findings reveal that participation in SMBCs significantly impacts consumers' social media fatigue (Time 1: $\beta = 0.051$, $p > 0.05$; Time 2: $\beta = 0.184$, $p < 0.05$) and information overload (Time 1: $\beta = 0.068$, $p > 0.05$; Time 2: $\beta = 0.164$, $p < 0.001$) over time. While initial continuous engagement in SMBCs does not result in social media fatigue or information overload, these effects become evident with prolonged participation. Social media fatigue is also strongly associated with negative emotions among consumers engaged in social media brand communities (Time 1: $\beta = 0.140$, $p < 0.001$; Time 2: $\beta = 0.186$, $p < 0.001$). In contrast, information overload shows no significant connection to depression or anxiety at either Time 1 or Time 2, as indicated in Table 3. Although continuous SMBC participation contributes to information overload over time, this overload does not directly influence psychological ill-being. Moreover, negative emotions have a notable positive effect on psychological ill-being, particularly depression (Time 1: $\beta = 0.106$, $p < 0.001$; Time 2: $\beta = 0.283$, $p < 0.001$) and anxiety (Time 1: $\beta = 0.087$, $p < 0.001$; Time 2: $\beta = 0.192$, $p < 0.001$), highlighting their significant role in shaping consumers' psychological ill-being.

The model-level analysis revealed a significant chi-square difference test between Time 1 and Time 2 ($\Delta\chi^2$ (28) = 78.280, $p < 0.001$) at a 95% confidence level. Following the approach of McLean *et al.* (2020), we further assessed the respective paths to test the research hypotheses. The results presented in Table 4 indicate significant differences among many of the paths examined over the two observation periods.

========= PLACE TABLE 4 HERE =========

The analysis in Table 4 details that hypotheses H5, H6a and H6b were not supported given the non-significant difference between the two datasets (Time 1 and Time 2). Accordingly, social media fatigue → negative emotions (H5: time 1: $\beta = 0.140^{***}$; time 2: $\beta = 0.186^{***}$; $p = 0.379$), information overload → depression (H6a: time 1: $\beta = -0.037^{ns}$; time 2: $\beta = 0.005^{ns}$; $p = 0.337$), and information overload → anxiety (H6b: time 1: $\beta = -0.018^{ns}$; time 2: $\beta = -0.025^{ns}$; $p = 0.789$) are not supported. Whereas social media fatigue had significant effect on negative emotions, the difference in effects over the two time periods were not significant.

On the other hand, hypotheses H1, H2, H3, H4, H7a and H7b were all supported as they are presented with a significant chi square difference test. The results indicate that social media

escapism had greater effects on continuous SMBC participation (H1: time 1: $\beta = 0.208^{***}$; time 2: $\beta = 0.325^{***}$; $p = 0.010$), and social media fatigue (H2: time 1: $\beta = 0.121^{***}$; time 2: $\beta = 0.324^{***}$; $p = 0.018$) over a sustained period, hence, supporting hypotheses H1 and H2. Additionally, in support of hypotheses H3 and H4, continuous SMBC participation had significant influence on social media fatigue (H3: time 1: $\beta = 0.051^{ns}$; time 2: $\beta = 0.184^{**}$; $p = 0.026$) and information overload (H4: time 1: $\beta = 0.068^{ns}$; time 2: $\beta = 0.164^{***}$; $p = 0.015$). The findings suggest that while initial participation of SMBC activities does not appear to impact on social media fatigue and information overload, the sustained and continuous participation in such activities significantly impacts on consumer social media fatigue and information overload. Furthermore, the negative emotions stemming from social media fatigue, as a result of prolonged participation in SMBC activities, significantly contribute to consumer psychological ill-being in the form of depression and anxiety. Over a sustained period, these negative emotions increasingly effect consumer depression (H7a: time 1: $\beta = 0.106^{***}$; time 2: $\beta = 0.283^{***}$; $p = 0.029$) and anxiety (H7b: time 1: $\beta = 0.087^{***}$; time 2: $\beta = 0.192^{***}$; $p = 0.044$), thus, providing support for hypotheses H7a and H7b, respectively.

4.4 Mediation Test

Following Zhao *et al.* (2010), we focused on the significance of the indirect effects to ascertain whether there is a mediated effect of social media fatigue as specified in the hypotheses. The mediation test was performed in AMOS 26.0 with a two-tailed significance from 5,000 bootstrapping runs (cf., Inoue *et al.*, 2017). The result indicates that with hypothesis H5b (Time 2: $\beta = .034$, $p < 0.05$) with a bias corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) of this effect (Time 2: 0.021, 0.077), social media fatigue significantly mediates the indirect effect between SMBC participation and negative emotions over a sustained period. Hence, supporting hypothesis H5b, while there was no significant mediation effect of social media fatigue in Time 1, the narrative changed over a sustained period of participation. In line with Zhao *et al.* (2010), a no-effect non-mediation is observed in relation to hypotheses H6c and H6d, where neither direct effect nor indirect effect exists. Hence, hypotheses H6c and H6d are not supported, suggesting that information overload does not have any mediation effect on continuous SMBC participation and consumer psychological ill-being.

On the other hand, we establish a complementary mediation effect (Zhao *et al.*, 2010) in which case the mediated effect and direct effect both exists. The results indicate that negative emotions significantly mediate the effect between social media fatigue and depression (Time 2: $\beta = .053$, $p < 0.05$) with a bias corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) of this effect (Time

2: 0.033, 0.089). Furthermore, negative emotions significantly mediate the effect between social media fatigue and anxiety (Time 2: $\beta = .036$, $p < 0.05$) with a bias corrected 95% confidence interval (CI) of this effect (Time 2: 0.013, 0.064). The results suggest that in a sustained period of participation in SMBC activities, negative emotions significantly mediate the relationship between social media fatigue and consumer psychological ill-being in a form of depression and anxiety. Thus, hypotheses H7c and H7d are supported.

5.0 Discussion

This study investigates the adverse psychological outcomes of continuous SMBC participation by drawing on TCIU and the SSO model. While much of the existing literature emphasizes the positive effects of SMBC participation (e.g., Habibi *et al.*, 2014; Machado *et al.*, 2019), this research shifts focus to its potential contribution to consumer psychological ill-being.

The findings reveal that consumers who seek escapism through social media are more likely to engage in sustained participation in SMBC activities, which heightens the risk of psychological ill-being over time. Specifically, escapism-driven participation increases vulnerability to social media fatigue, which subsequently triggers negative emotional responses. Informed by the TCIU (Kardefelt-Winther, 2014) and SSO model (Koeske & Koeske, 1993), the study demonstrates that the stressors arising from prolonged SMBC participation result in strain, manifested as fatigue and negative emotions. Notably, while social media fatigue did not mediate the link between continuous SMBC participation and negative emotions in the initial stages of participation, it became a significant mediator over an extended period, highlighting the cumulative effects of long-term involvement.

Further, negative emotions had a significant positive relationship with depression and anxiety symptoms. Negative emotions experienced on SMBC platforms sometimes make individuals feel offended and disappointed (Smith and Bolton, 2002), and these in turn affect their psychological mental state. In response to Kaur *et al.* (2021), this study examines the connection between negative emotions, participation in SMBC practices and consumers' psychological ill-being (depression and anxiety) over a sustained period. The findings reported here suggest that moments of psychological ill-being are experienced by consumers through negative emotions after a sustained period of participation.

Prior research suggests that frequent exposure to excessive information can lead to exhaustion and contribute to psychological ill-being (Swar et al., 2017; Yu et al., 2018). However, contrary

to these findings, this study reveals that information overload experienced within SMBC platforms over time does not significantly predict psychological ill-being (e.g., depression and anxiety). A plausible explanation is that individuals may develop coping strategies or resilience that buffer the adverse effects of information overload (Gloria and Steinhardt, 2016). Additionally, it is possible that consumers have adapted to the constant flow of information typical of SMBCs. As such, this study contends that information overload, in this context, does not directly contribute to consumers' psychological ill-being.

5.1 Theoretical Implications

This study makes several important contributions to the current literature on social media escapism, social media brand community participation and consumer psychological ill-being through the lens of theory of compensatory Internet use (TCIU) and stressor-strain-outcome model (SSO). First, this research advances understanding of how social media escapism and sustained SMBC participation contribute to consumer psychological ill-being. Using a two-wave survey, it responds to calls for longitudinal insights into the relationship between social media activities and psychological ill-being over time (Kaur *et al.*, 2021; Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2023). Unlike prior studies that have primarily examined social media use more broadly, this study focuses specifically on the prolonged effects of continuous SMBC participation, revealing its role in influencing social media fatigue and psychological ill-being, including depression and anxiety.

Second, while much of the existing research has emphasized the impact of social media on subjective well-being (Karikari *et al.*, 2017), this study highlights the resultant effects of consumer psychological ill-being over an extended period of SMBC participation. Findings show that although initial participation did not induce fatigue or information overload, prolonged participation over 12 months significantly contributed to these stressors. Theoretically, this extends the TCIU and SSO models by emphasizing the cumulative psychological effects of sustained SMBC participation and the temporal dynamics involved. These extensions provide a richer, more comprehensive framework for studying the impacts of continuous SMBC participation on consumer psychological ill-being. In line with on Dhir *et al.* (2018) and Fu *et al.* (2020), the findings suggest that prolonged SMBC participation acts as a stressor, leading to cognitive and emotional strain in the form of fatigue and negative emotions. These strains, in turn, manifest as psychological ill-being, including symptoms of depression and anxiety.

Third, in contributing to the literature on technology and psychological ill-being, this study provides a theoretically significant argument by confirming social media fatigue as a mediating variable between SMBC participation and negative emotions (Sheng *et al.*, 2023). Drawing on the TCIU and the SSO model, we demonstrate that continuous participation in social media brand communities (SMBC) over an extended period triggers negative emotions, with social media fatigue playing a critical mediating role. For instance, from the perspective of TCIU, individuals initially engage with SMBCs to escape from the stresses of life (Wang *et al.*, 2015b), however, prolonged engagement becomes a stressor (Whelan *et al.*, 2020), contributing to social media fatigue and negative emotions. This highlights an important pathway through which habitual SMBC participation leads to psychological ill-being.

Additionally, this study extends on Dhir *et al.* (2018) by demonstrating that negative emotions, triggered by fatigue, further exacerbate consumer psychological ill-being. Accordingly, as consumers become fatigued, experiencing comments that trigger negative emotions is likely to worsen their plight. These findings align with prior work linking social media fatigue to reduced life satisfaction (Elhai *et al.*, 2016), and increased emotional tensions (James *et al.*, 2017), reinforcing the notion that negative emotional experiences within SMBCs can deepen consumer psychological ill-being.

Finally, this study introduces psychological ill-being as a critical construct within the context of SMBC participation. By offering longitudinal insights, it addresses calls by Ostrom et al. (2021) and McLean et al. (2025) to explore the mental health impacts of technology use. The findings underscore that prolonged participation in SMBCs induces fatigue and negative emotions, which ultimately manifest as symptoms of depression and anxiety. In doing so, this research contributes to a growing body of work exploring the adverse psychological consequences of sustained SMBC participation.

5.2 Practical Implications

This study highlights several implications to guide managers of social media brand communities, policymakers and consumers following our findings.

5.2.1 Implication for brand managers

Following our findings, brand managers need to be aware of their contribution to increasing social media facilitated ill-being. They should consider how often they are posting and what

they are posting and to focus on a positive narrative within their posts. Research indicates that brands that engage positively with their customers can enhance consumer well-being and brand performance (Verduyn *et al.*, 2017). Brands could consult with their customers on the types of content they would like to see on social media to bring consumers into the conversation to reduce the likelihood of information overload and fatigue, impacting a consumer's psychological ill-being. Even though, information overload did not play any significant role in consumer psychological ill-being, managers should still be conscious of the well-being state of their consumers. In order not to worsen the mental health of consumers, managers as part of being creative should share relevant and short messages or videos that could easily be processed by members of the platform (Karikari *et al.*, 2017).

Further, given the established link between consumer psychological ill-being and negative emotions experienced on SMBC platforms as a result of social media fatigue, brand managers must take proactive steps to mitigate these adverse effects. Brand managers should promote a supportive and positive community environment where consumers feel valued and heard, as this could buffer the negative effects of stressors. Brands should signpost the page rules when customers either join or follow their community. Managers should ensure there is decorum on the platform and are able to guarantee fairness in comments expressed by members to avoid negative emotions and tensions on the platform.

5.2.2 Implication for policy (governments)

Given the long-term effects of social media escapism on consumer psychological ill-being, the need to develop public policy to help educate individuals on healthy use of social media is imperative. In such instances, governments could partner with social marketing agencies to increase the awareness creation of the dark side of social media use targeting the youth, who are particularly vulnerable to the negative effects of excessive social media use. Such campaigns could outline other healthier pursuits for individuals to engage their time with while escaping the realities of life. For instance, individuals could be encouraged to immerse themselves in sporting activities, arts – music, dance, etc. Governments should integrate educational programs into school curricula that teach students about the potential mental health risks of excessive social media use and promote digital literacy (Dhir *et al.*, 2018). These programs should focus on balancing online and offline activities, recognizing signs of social media fatigue, and developing healthy social media habits. This could help governments and

healthcare systems to manage the growing problem of ill-being and mental health associated with social media consumption.

5.2.3 Implications for consumers

As consumers seek ways of engaging themselves in meaningful activities, they ought to manage their time carefully on social media. Consumers could utilize apps to help restrict the length of time spent on social media apps or use apps to monitor their use to help them balance their time better between different types of social activities. In effect, consumers should be moderate in their participation in such online activities and consider other alternatives in interacting with friends and family members to minimize the possibility of impacting on their psychological ill-being. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) can also play a crucial role in promoting healthier social media practices and mitigating the negative impacts of overuse as demonstrated in this study. Through educational initiatives, support networks, and policy advocacy, NGOs can empower consumers to manage their social media usage effectively and engage in a balanced range of activities. By promoting a culture of moderation and awareness, these efforts can significantly reduce the risk of psychological ill-being associated with social media fatigue and information overload.

6.0 Limitations and Future Research

This study is not without limitations. This study focused on the dark side of social media escapism and continuous SMBC participation through a longitudinal research approach. While some interesting results are reported, it may be limited in the lack of explanation of some of the unsupported hypotheses. In addressing such a limitation, future research could also employ qualitative research to further explore social media brand community platform dynamics and its alignment with consumer psychological ill-being.

This study is limited to Facebook brand community platforms. It will be interesting to conduct a comparative study involving other social media platforms such as LinkedIn, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat, YouTube, etc. Such studies could help understand any variations across the social media platforms and how these variations impact on consumer psychological ill-being. For instance, information overload resulting from their continuous participation in SMBC activities had no significant effect on consumer psychological ill-being. What could account

for this finding? Could other social media platforms report similar effects? Would specific types of media (i.e., video, image, text) have different effects? Future research could explore this further.

Most of the respondents are members who follow telecommunication firms. Future research could consider other brands or industries where consumers escape to find solace by participating in brand interactions. Also, other moderating or mediation variables could be considered in future research to examine how they impact on consumer psychological ill-being. In this instance, variables such as platform aesthetic design, integrated artificial intelligent voice assistants, nature of interactions, types of media could be considered. Here, it will be interesting to explore how these factors could moderate or mediate the relationship between brand community participation and psychological ill-being. In addition, this study examined how social media escapism exposes individual consumers to potential psychological ill-being concerns. This study did not consider individual differences and how they respond to emotional tensions and information overload on such brand community platforms. Such omission could limit the generalization of the study findings. Hence, future research may consider any potential differences considering the individual personality traits such as extraversion or neuroticism.

Furthermore, participants in SMBCs tend to engage at different levels, typically classified into consuming, contributing, and creating behaviors (Muntinga et al., 2011). Future research could meaningfully explore how these distinct engagement patterns may differentially impact consumer psychological ill-being. In addition, this study does not address how psychological ill-being may influence key managerial outcomes, such as future brand usage, brand loyalty, or participation in policy-relevant initiatives (e.g., willingness to adopt healthier alternative forms of escapism). These gaps highlight the need for further investigation to deepen our understanding of the broader implications of psychological ill-being within SMBC contexts. Lastly, the application of a convenience sampling method, which is non-probabilistic in nature, presents the possibility of bias within the results. Although this approach is not new in quantitative research, we acknowledge its limitations and advise interpreting the results with caution. Future studies are encouraged to replicate this model using probability sampling techniques in diverse settings to enhance generalization.

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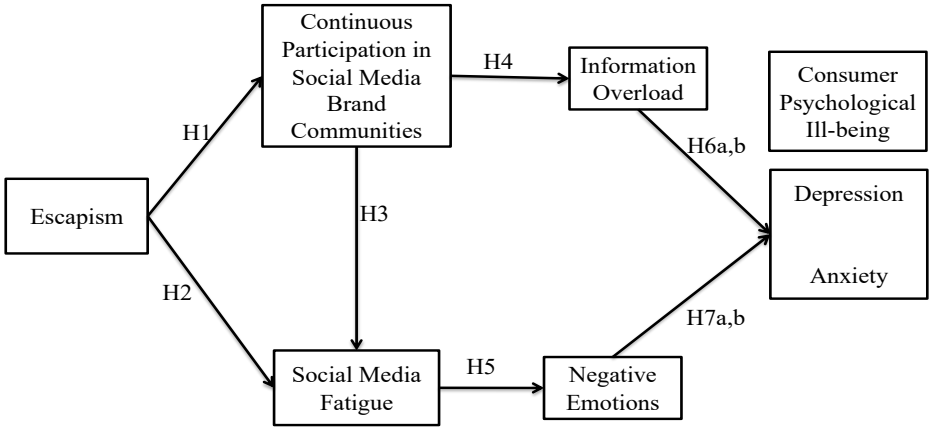
APPENDIX 1

Item	Factor loading	CR	AVE
Social media fatigue (Kaur *et al.*, 2021)		0.921	0.747
The amount of information available on social media makes me tense	.767		
Due to using social media, I feel rather mentally exhausted.	.988		
After a session of using social media, I feel really fatigued.	.772		
I find it difficult to relax after continually using social media	.790		
Due to social media use, I feel exhausted.	.889		
Continuous SMBC Participation (Kang *et al.*, 2016)		0.851	0.656
I benefit from following the brand community's rules	.860		
I am motivated to participate in the brand community's activities because I feel better afterwards	.774		
I am motivated to participate in the brand community's activities because I am able to support other members	.794		
Social Media Escapism (Osei-Frimpong *et al.*, 2023)		0.893	0.736
Following brands on social media platforms gets me away from it all	.820		
Participation in brand engagement activities on social media makes me feel like I am in another world	.880		
I get so involved when I follow brands on social media that I forget everything else	.873		
Information overload (Yu *et al.*, 2018)		0.887	0.724
I am often distracted by the excessive amount of information and in social media	.879		
I find that I am overwhelmed by the amount of information that I process on a daily basis from social media	.853		
I feel some problems with too much information in social media to synthesize instead of not having enough information	.820		
Negative emotions (Smith and Bolton, 2002)		0.879	0.707
Angry	.857		
Offended	.860		
Disappointed	.805		
Consumer psychological ill-being: Depression (Dhir *et al.*, 2018)		0.879	0.593
I have felt lonely	.736		
I did not enjoy my life	.797		
I have felt myself unworthy	.845		
I have felt all the joy had disappeared from my life	.730		
I have felt my sadness was not relieved even with help of family/friends	.735		
Anxiety (Dhir *et al.*, 2018)		0.899	0.640
I worry about what others say about me	.780		
I worry that other don't like me	.827		
I'm afraid that other will not like me	.871		
I worry about what others think of me	.726		
I feel that others make fun of me	.790		

Source: Authors own work

FIGURES

Figure 1: Research Model



Source: Authors own work

TABLES

Table I: Characteristics of respondents

Respondent Characteristics	Frequency (n)	%		
Gender				
Male	436	54.2		
Female	369	45.8		
Age (in years)				
20 – 29	392	48.7		
30 – 39	250	31.1		
40 – 49	102	12.7		
50 – 59	61	7.6		
Education				
Senior High School	124	15.4		
Higher National Diploma	125	15.5		
Professional Qualification (e.g., ACCA, CIM, etc.)	56	7.0		
Undergraduates	436	54.2		
Post-graduate Qualification	64	8.0		
Frequency of visit to brand social networking page	**Time 1 (n)**	**%**	**Time 2 (n)**	**%**
Multiple times daily	224	27.8	247	30.7
Once daily	127	15.8	288	28.3
Multiple times weekly	233	28.9	149	18.5
Once weekly	161	20.0	126	15.7
At least once a month	60	7.5	55	6.8
Time spent on brand social networking page				
< 1 hour	39	4.8	32	4.0
Between 1 to 2 hours	141	17.5	123	15.3
Between 2 to 3 hours	275	34.2	214	26.6
Between 3 to 4 hours	188	23.4	198	24.6
More than 5 hours	162	20.1	238	29.6

Source: Authors own work

Table 2a: Validity and construct reliability measures – Time 1

	CR	AVE	MSV	IOV	SMF	BCP	ESC	DEP	ANX	NEM
Information Overload (IOV)	0.872	0.695	0.004	**0.834**						
Social Media Fatigue (SMF)	0.912	0.724	0.203	0.061	**0.851**					
Social Media Brand Community Participation (BCP)	0.890	0.729	0.036	0.061	0.004	**0.854**				
Social Media Escapism (ESC)	0.887	0.723	0.036	0.017	0.029	0.189	**0.850**			
Depression (DEP	0.892	0.625	0.440	-0.001	0.440	0.056	-0.019	**0.791**		
Anxiety (ANX)	0.887	0.613	0.440	0.000	0.451	0.019	-0.071	0.663	**0.783**	
Negative Emotions (NEM)	0.871	0.693	0.009	0.065	-0.046	0.079	-0.036	-0.013	0.096	**0.832**

Source: Authors own work

Table 2b: Validity and construct reliability measures – Time 2

	CR	AVE	MSV	IOV	SMF	BCP	ESC	DEP	ANX	NEM
Information Overload (IOV)	0.887	0.724	0.021	**0.851**						
Social Media Fatigue (SMF)	0.921	0.747	0.239	0.053	**0.864**					
Social Media Brand Community Participation (BCP)	0.851	0.656	0.021	0.146	0.041	**0.810**				
Social Media Escapism (ESC)	0.893	0.736	0.011	0.023	0.104	0.107	**0.858**			
Depression (DEP	0.879	0.593	0.545	0.020	0.489	-0.049	-0.040	**0.770**		
Anxiety (ANX)	0.899	0.640	0.545	0.011	0.475	-0.001	-0.092	0.738	**0.800**	
Negative Emotions (NEM)	0.879	0.707	0.009	0.096	-0.033	0.012	-0.001	-0.020	0.060	**0.841**

Source: Authors own work

Table 3: Structural parameter relationships

Paths	Time 1			Time 2		
	β	t-value	R^2	β	t-value	R^2
Social Media Escapism →Continuous SMBC participation (H1)	.208***	6.108	0.064	.325***	3.600	0.072
Social Media Escapism → Social Media Fatigue (H2)	.121***	3.490	0.012	.324***	3.540	0.021
Continuous SMBC participation → Social Media Fatigue (H3)	.051ns	1.432		.184**	2.942	
Continuous SMBC participation → Information Overload (H4)	.068ns	1.932	0.005	.164***	4.716	0.027
Social Media Fatigue → Negative Emotions (H5)	.140***	4.006	0.020	.186***	5.375	0.035
Information Overload → Depression (H6a)	-.037ns	1.186	0.011	.005ns	0.171	0.011
Information Overload → Anxiety (H6b)	-.018ns	-0.180	0.007	-.025ns	-1.267	0.015
Negative Emotions → Depression (H7a)	.106***	4.523		.283***	7.084	
Negative Emotions → Anxiety (H7b)	.087***	4.395		.192***	5.565	
Gender → Continuous SMBC participation	.047ns	1.355		.009ns	0.243	
Age → Continuous SMBC participation	-.122***	-3.575		.084**	2.417	
Education → Continuous SMBC participation	-.010ns	-0.294		.062ns	1.765	
Frequency of Visit → Continuous SMBC participation	.052ns	1.522		.029ns	0.824	
Time Spent → Continuous SMBC participation	-.005ns	-0.154		-.041ns	-1.191	
Gender → Social Media Fatigue	.055ns	1.187		.037ns	1.025	
Age → Social Media Fatigue	.060ns	1.691		.024ns	0.683	
Education → Social Media Fatigue	-.008ns	-0.236		.019ns	0.550	
Frequency of Use → Social Media Fatigue	-.006ns	-0.168		.011ns	0.316	
Time Spent → Social Media Fatigue	.051ns	1.432		.084**	2.369	

******p < 0 .001, **p < 0 .05, ns – non-significant; β – Standardized Path Coefficient; SMBC – social media brand community (Source: Authors own work)***

Table 4: Longitudinal Measurement Invariance Test

Paths	Time 1 (β)	Time 2 (β)	$\Delta\chi^2$ (df=1)	p-value
Social Media Escapism →Continuous SMBC participation (H1)	.208***	.325***	6.661	0.010
Social Media Escapism → Social Media Fatigue (H2)	.121***	.324***	5.713	0.018
Continuous SMBC participation → Social Media Fatigue (H3)	.051ns	.184**	4.949	0.026
Continuous SMBC participation → Information Overload (H4)	.068ns	.164***	5.935	0.015
Social Media Fatigue → Negative Emotions (H5)	.140***	.186***	0.775	0.379
Information Overload → Depression (H6a)	-.037ns	.005ns	0.922	0.337
Information Overload → Anxiety (H6b)	-.018ns	-.025ns	0.072	0.789
Negative Emotions → Depression (H7a)	.106***	.283***	4.653	0.029
Negative Emotions → Anxiety (H7b)	.087***	.192***	3.858	0.044

******p < 0 .001, **p < 0 .05, ns – non-significant; β – Standardized Path Coefficient; SMBC – social media brand community (Source: Authors own work)***