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THE ATTENTION ECONOMY'S TOLL: HOW CONSUMER FATIGUE IS RESHAPING DIGITAL MARKETING

Abstract

Digital marketing operates on an attention-extraction model, but evidence suggests this model is failing. This systematic review synthesizes 31 empirical studies (2015–2026) examining digital fatigue and consumer resistance across Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science following PRISMA guidelines. Key findings reveal three psychological mechanisms: psychological reactance (Shoenberger, Kim, & Sun, 2021; Chen et al., 2019), self-determination violations (Chiu, Sun, & Ismailov, 2022), and emotional exhaustion from information overload (Sheng et al., 2023). Critically, the literature reveals a paradox: while many consumers avoid ads and pursue digital detox (Bograkou & Kontopoulou, 2025; Chen & Kent, 2025), digital burnout can paradoxically increase platform use when driven by internet addiction (da Silva et al., 2024). Consumer resistance manifests as ad avoidance, detox behaviors, and compulsive buying cycles. This review concludes that extraction-based engagement is unsustainable. We propose a novel Integrated Consumer Fatigue Framework (ICFF) linking antecedents (overload, saturation, privacy concerns), psychological mediators (reactance, exhaustion, low self-control), and behavioral outcomes (avoidance, detox, or paradoxical continued use). Moderators include age, self-control, product type, and internet addiction. Brands must prioritize authenticity, autonomy, consumer well-being, and segment-specific strategies.

Keywords: attention economy, digital fatigue, consumer resistance, psychological reactance, ad avoidance, digital burnout paradox, emotional exhaustion, consumer well-being, digital marketing effectiveness
JEL Classification: M31, M37, D91, D12, L86

Introduction

The attention economy treats human attention as a scarce commodity to be captured and monetized (Davenport & Beck, 2001). For nearly two decades, digital marketing has relied on an extraction model—endless feeds, push notifications, and algorithmic targeting. However, evidence shows this model is reaching its limits. Globally, ad blocker usage exceeds 42%, and click through

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rates have fallen below 0.05%. Bograkou and Kontopoulou (2025) argue the attention economy has become an "annoyance economy," eroding brand love. Newman (2019) further argues that weak legal oversight has enabled dominant firms to concentrate power and shape attention markets in harmful ways, calling for stronger legal reforms.

Definitions. Digital fatigue is a multidimensional state of cognitive, emotional, and behavioral exhaustion from prolonged digital interaction (Ceylan, Basal, & Gayretli, 2024). Psychological reactance is a motivational state opposing perceived freedom threats (Brehm, 1966; Shoenberger et al., 2021). Self determination theory (SDT) posits that frustrated autonomy and competence needs produce disengagement (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Chiu et al., 2022). Algorithmic burnout refers to exhaustion from opaque recommendation systems (Balaskas et al., 2025). The personalization–privacy paradox describes the tension between desiring tailored content and resenting data exploitation (Cloarec, 2020). Digital detox is intentional technology abstinence (Vaghefi & Turel, 2025; Chen & Kent, 2025).

Research Questions. This review answers three questions: (1) Why do consumers experience digital fatigue? (2) How do they resist digital marketing? (3) What should marketers do differently?

Scope. This review synthesizes evidence from multiple geographical contexts (Greece, Thailand, Malaysia, China, United States, Portugal), considers age-based segments (Generation Y, consumers aged 40+), and distinguishes product types (utilitarian vs. hedonic) where evidence permits. Workplace digital fatigue is excluded.

Contribution. Synthesizing 31 empirical studies from 2015–2026 across multiple databases, we provide the first integrated framework linking reactance, SDT, algorithmic burnout, emotional exhaustion, and the privacy paradox to consumer resistance behaviors. Unlike prior reviews, we identify a critical paradox in the literature (burnout sometimes increases platform use) and propose an original conceptual model. Section 2 describes the methodology; Section 3 presents the conceptual framework; Section 4 analyzes psychological mechanisms; Section 5 summarizes resistance evidence; Section 6 discusses implications and limitations; Section 7 concludes.

METHODOLOGY

This systematic review followed PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021).

Search Strategy

Three databases were searched: Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science. The search period was January 2015 – June 2026. Manual cross referencing supplemented the database search.

Search string: ("attention economy" OR "digital fatigue" OR "consumer fatigue" OR "ad fatigue" OR "social media fatigue") AND ("psychological

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reactance" OR "ad avoidance" OR "digital detox" OR "algorithmic burnout" OR "emotional exhaustion").

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria: peer reviewed empirical studies, English language, direct focus on consumer fatigue or resistance in digital marketing contexts.

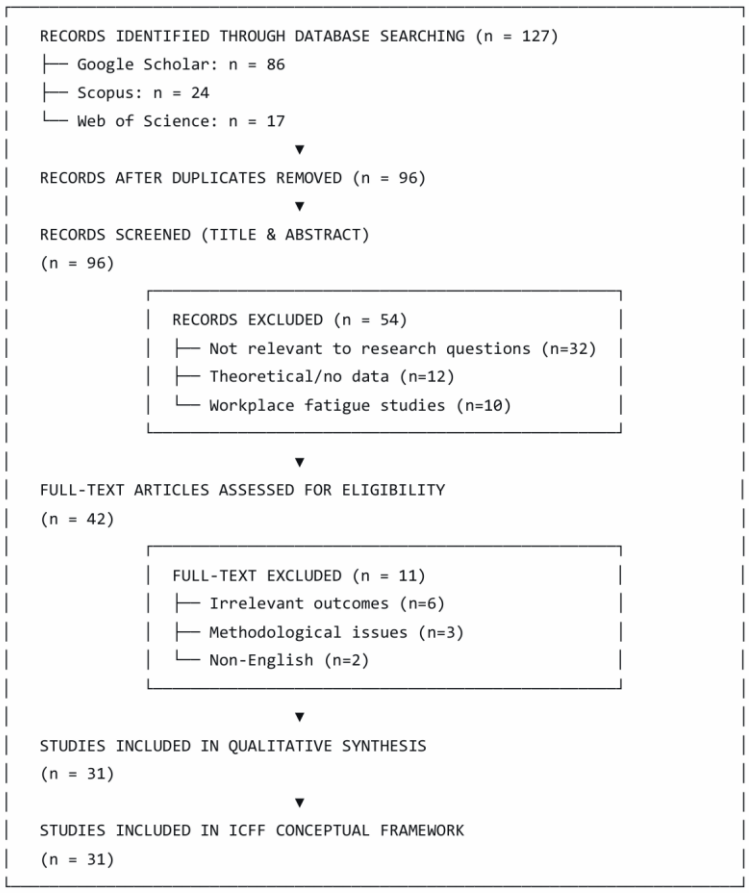
Exclusion criteria: theoretical papers without data, workplace fatigue studies, pre 2015 publications, non-English papers.

Selection Procedure

The initial search yielded 127 records (Google Scholar: 86; Scopus: 24; Web of Science: 17). After duplicate removal (n=31), 96 records underwent title/abstract screening. 54 records were excluded. 42 full text articles were assessed for eligibility. 11 were excluded (irrelevant outcomes or methods). Final N = 31 studies.

PRISMA Flow Diagram

PRISMA 2020 FLOW DIAGRAM



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Quality Appraisal

Quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) version 2018. Each study received a percentage score (0–100%) based on five criteria appropriate to its design.

MMAT Results Summary:

- 80–100% (high quality): 12 studies
- 60–79% (moderate quality): 15 studies
- Below 60% (low quality): 4 studies (retained but interpreted cautiously)

No studies were excluded based on quality alone; lower-quality studies were given less weight in conclusions.

Thematic Synthesis

Based on synthesis of all 31 studies, I propose the Integrated Consumer Fatigue Framework (ICFF), which organizes the literature into antecedents, psychological mediators, behavioral outcomes, and moderators.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: INTEGRATED CONSUMER FATIGUE FRAMEWORK (ICFF)

Based on synthesis of all 31 studies, I propose the Integrated Consumer Fatigue Framework (ICFF) , which organizes the literature into antecedents, psychological mediators, behavioral outcomes, and moderators.

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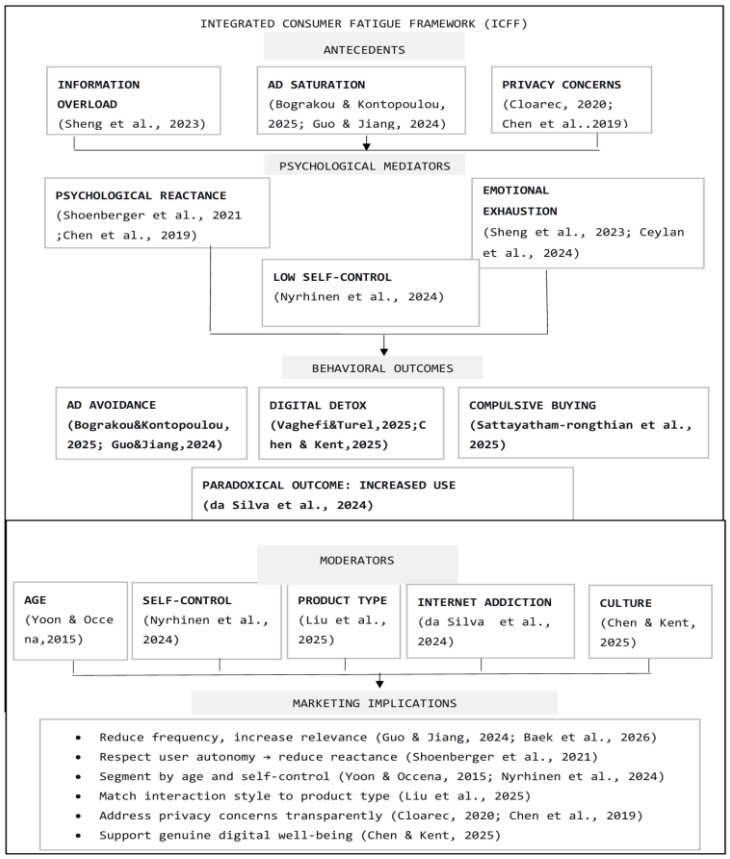

Figure 1: Integrated Consumer Fatigue Framework (ICFF)
Source: own compilation

Causal Pathways in the ICFF

The ICFF proposes three primary pathways:

Pathway A (Reactance Pathway): Ad saturation + perceived manipulation → psychological reactance → ad avoidance and detox behaviors (Shoenberger et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2019; Guo & Jiang, 2024).

Pathway B (Exhaustion Pathway): Information overload + privacy concerns → emotional exhaustion → either (a) withdrawal/avoidance OR (b) paradoxical continued use when internet addiction is present (Sheng et al., 2023; da Silva et al., 2024).

Pathway C (Self-Control Pathway): Personalization overload + low self-control → positive attitude toward targeted ads → impulse buying (Nyrhinen et al., 2024; Ali et al., 2025). This pathway explains compulsive purchasing despite fatigue.

Contradictions Resolved by the ICFF

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The literature contains an apparent contradiction: some studies find burnout reduces engagement (Ceylan et al., 2024), while da Silva et al. (2024) find digital burnout increases platform use. The ICFF resolves this by introducing internet addiction as a moderator. When addiction is present, exhausted consumers continue using platforms despite negative feelings—a compulsive rather than choice-driven behavior.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MECHANISMS: WHY CONSUMERS FATIGUE

Psychological Reactance

Shoenberger, Kim, and Sun (2021) found that threat-to-freedom messages generate reactance, lowering ad attitudes. Chen et al. (2019) extended this by identifying rational choice factors (negative-effect perceptions) as dominant determinants of reactance toward online personalized advertising. Critically, affective factors (ownership, vulnerability) significantly influence these rational choice factors. When consumers feel their data is owned or they are vulnerable, reactance intensifies.

Emotional Exhaustion and Information Overload

Sheng et al. (2023) demonstrated that information overload from platforms directly increases emotional exhaustion. This exhaustion mediates the relationship between overload and social media fatigue. The shift of interpersonal communication online means users constantly receive, access, and process messages, advertisements, and news—creating cumulative cognitive burden. The authors conclude that while social media offers benefits like increased access to information and ease of contact, it also produces emotional exhaustion and fatigue.

Self-Determination Theory Violations

Chiu, Sun, and Ismailov (2022) showed that autonomy and competence are more important than relatedness in digital contexts. When digital environments violate consumer autonomy (e.g., forced notifications, opaque algorithms), fatigue accelerates. Jackson (2025) confirmed that young people actively navigate autonomy threats but remain vulnerable to emotional effects like social comparison. While they use strategies to maintain autonomy, social media continues to commodify their attention.

Algorithmic Burnout and the Personalization–Privacy Paradox

Balaskas et al. (2025) introduced "algorithmic burnout"—active resistance to personalized digital persuasion. Cloarec (2020) explains the personalization–privacy paradox: consumers value personalization but resent data exploitation. Ali et al. (2025) added that urgency and scarcity tactics, while effective short-term, generate fatigue and ethical concerns when overused. Baek et al. (2026) reinforced this: frequent promotional emails boost short-term sales but cause opt-outs and reduced long-term value, recommending segmented, retention-focused strategies.

Low Self-Control as a Vulnerability Factor

SJ-ECONOMICS
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Nyrhinen et al. (2024) revealed that low self-control increases impulse buying both directly and indirectly through positive attitudes toward targeted advertisements and social network impulsiveness. Consumers with reduced self-control become less resistant to targeted marketing stimuli—a key mechanism linking fatigue to compulsive purchasing. The findings indicate that low self-control significantly increases impulse buying both directly and indirectly through these mediators.

EVIDENCE OF CONSUMER RESISTANCE

Ad Avoidance

Onișor and Ioniță (2021) used eye-tracking with 121 respondents, finding that users who gave the least attention to ads had the best ad memory—forcing attention does not guarantee retention. Bograkou and Kontopoulou (2025) demonstrated ad saturation as a negative environmental stimulus driving avoidance. Guo and Jiang (2024) found that excessively frequent advertising campaigns inevitably cause consumers to become fatigued, unresponsive, or even irritated, recommending that firms proportionally reduce advertising expenditure when fatigue is present.

Digital Detox Behaviors

Vaghefi and Turel (2025) examined hedonic IT abstinence maintenance, identifying self-efficacy and peer pressure as key factors. Yuting (2024) confirmed detox intervention effectiveness. However, Chen and Kent (2025) introduced a critical nuance: in China, digital detox apps like Forest reframe detox as productivity enhancement rather than genuine well-being. Commercialization and cultural context limit detox effectiveness, potentially reinforcing optimization pressures rather than enabling meaningful disconnection. Features such as gamification, self-tracking, and community engagement help reduce unintentional device use but may also reinforce existing pressures.

The Paradox: When Burnout Increases Usage

da Silva et al. (2024) found a counterintuitive result: digital burnout has a significant positive effect on digital consumer platform use, partially mediated by utilitarian motivation. Crucially, burnout was driven by internet addiction (not digital literacy), and effects were stronger among older consumers. This resolves an apparent contradiction in the literature: fatigued consumers do not always withdraw; addicted consumers continue using despite exhaustion.

Compulsive Buying and Self-Control Depletion

Sattayathamrongthian et al. (2025) found that social media buying pressure leads to digital fatigue, which depletes self-control and drives compulsive purchasing. Nyrhinen et al. (2024) confirmed that low self-control enables impulsive buying by fostering positive attitudes toward targeted ads.

Generational and Age-Based Differences

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Maskun et al. (2025) found Generation Y experiences digital stress, cognitive overload, and mental health concerns. Yoon and Occena (2015) revealed that trust in C2C e-commerce depends on age: consumers aged 40+ show different trust patterns (other trust of buyer/seller matters more than website quality). Liang (2022) demonstrated that algorithmic platforms like Douyin promote highly competitive, short-term profit dynamics that limit long-term accumulation for individuals, reflecting a shift toward a data-driven "attention economy" model.

Born Digital Organizations' Response Strategies

Hafezieh and Pollock (2023) examined how "born digital" companies organize to handle consumer demands, identifying three practices: pre-emptive (predicting customer needs), reactive (responding quickly to changes), and reflective & adaptive (continuously improving internal processes). These practices represent organizational-level responses to consumer fatigue, explaining how born digital organizations anticipate, respond to, and continuously adapt to consumer demands.

AI and Intelligent Customer Service

Li et al. (2025) found that social influence, service quality, technical characteristics, and personal perceptions all had significant positive effects on college students' willingness to use AI-powered intelligent customer service in e-commerce enterprises. Liu et al. (2025) demonstrated that product-focused interactions enhance purchase intention for utilitarian products via perceived value, while social interactions boost purchase intention for hedonic products through social presence.

DISCUSSION

Summary of Findings

This systematic review of 31 studies yields four main conclusions. First, psychological mechanisms driving fatigue are well-established: reactance (Shoenberger et al., 2021; Chen et al., 2019), emotional exhaustion from information overload (Sheng et al., 2023), autonomy violations (Chiu et al., 2022; Jackson, 2025), and low self-control (Nyrhinen et al., 2024). Second, consumer resistance is real and growing: ad avoidance, digital detox, and in some cases compulsive buying. Third, a critical paradox exists: burnout sometimes increases platform use when driven by internet addiction (da Silva et al., 2024)—fatigued consumers are not a monolithic group. Fourth, age, self-control, product type, and cultural context moderate all these relationships.

Theoretical Contributions

This review makes three theoretical contributions. First, we propose the Integrated Consumer Fatigue Framework (ICFF) , the first model to integrate reactance, emotional exhaustion, self-determination, and low self-control into a single causal framework. Second, we identify and resolve the burnout paradox by introducing internet addiction as a moderator. Third, we extend the

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personalization–privacy paradox (Cloarec, 2020) by incorporating Chen et al.'s (2019) finding that affective factors (ownership, vulnerability) drive rational choice perceptions.

Practical Implications (Operationalized)

Implication	Operationalization (How to Implement)	Source
Reduce ad frequency	Limit retargeting to ≤3 exposures per week; cap push notifications at 2/day; proportionally reduce ad spend when fatigue detected	Bograkou & Kontopoulou (2025); Guo & Jiang (2024); Baek et al. (2026)
Respect user autonomy	Provide opt-out options prominently; explain algorithmic decisions; avoid manipulative scarcity tactics	Shoenberger et al. (2021); Chiu et al. (2022); Jackson (2025)
Segment by age	For 40+: emphasize buyer/seller trust signals; for younger: leverage personalization carefully	Yoon & Occena (2015)
Match interaction to product type	Utilitarian products: product-focused AI interactions; Hedonic products: social-focused interactions	Liu et al. (2025)
Address privacy transparently	Show data ownership controls; explain vulnerability protections; reduce perceived threat to freedom	Cloarec (2020); Chen et al. (2019)
Support digital well-being	Integrate detox features (usage tracking, focus modes); avoid gamification that reinforces optimization; consider cultural context	Chen & Kent (2025); Yuting (2024)
Target internet addiction	Identify addicted segments; avoid exploiting addiction cycles; provide healthy usage alternatives	da Silva et al. (2024)

Limitations

This review has several limitations. First, while we included Scopus and Web of Science, the search was limited to English-language publications, potentially excluding relevant non-English research. Second, the ICFF is proposed based on synthesis but requires empirical validation (e.g., structural equation modeling or meta-analysis). Third, the review is cross-sectional in its synthesis; longitudinal studies on fatigue progression remain rare. Fourth, quality appraisal (MMAT) identified 4 low-quality studies; while retained, they received less weight. Fifth, most studies are from Western or Southeast Asian contexts (Greece, Thailand, Malaysia, China, US, Portugal); generalizability to other regions (Africa, Latin America, Middle East) is unknown. Sixth, the review excludes workplace digital fatigue, a related but distinct phenomenon.

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Future Research Agenda

Based on gaps identified across all 31 studies, I propose the following research priorities:

Priority	Specific Research Question	Methodological Suggestion
1	Does the ICFF hold across different cultural contexts?	Cross-cultural replication (Africa, Latin America, Middle East)
2	How does the burnout paradox (da Silva et al., 2024) manifest longitudinally?	Longitudinal panel study (6–12 months)
3	Can digital detox interventions be designed to avoid commercialization bias?	RCT comparing gamified vs. non-gamified detox apps
4	What is the causal direction between low self-control and fatigue?	Experimental manipulation of self-control depletion
5	How do born digital organizations' response strategies (Hafezieh & Pollock, 2023) affect consumer fatigue outcomes?	Mixed-methods: survey + organizational case studies
6	What are the neural correlates of digital fatigue?	fMRI or EEG studies during ad exposure
7	How can legal reforms (Newman, 2019) reshape attention markets to protect consumer well-being?	Policy analysis and comparative legal studies

Conclusions

The attention economy is taking a measurable toll on consumers. This systematic review of 31 studies reveals consistent findings across multiple psychological mechanisms (reactance, emotional exhaustion, autonomy violation, low self-control) and resistance behaviors (avoidance, detox, paradoxical continued use when addiction is present). The proposed Integrated Consumer Fatigue Framework (ICFF) offers a unified model for understanding when and why fatigue leads to withdrawal versus continued use.

The extraction model is unsustainable. The future of digital marketing belongs not to those who capture the most clicks, but to those who earn the most trust. However, this requires more than good intentions. Brands must operationally reduce frequency, respect autonomy, segment by age and self-control, match interaction styles to product types, and support genuine digital well-being—not productivity-masked detox. Without these changes, the attention economy will continue eroding the consumer trust on which it ultimately depends. As Newman (2019) argues, stronger legal reforms are also needed to build a fairer and more balanced attention economy.

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