

Managing Digital Distractions and Information Overload

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Article Received: 25/11/2025

Article Accepted: 29/12/2025

Published Online: 30/12/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.12.763

Abstract

Digital distractions refer to interruptions caused by digital technologies, such as emails, social media notifications, or smart phone alerts that shift attention from immediate tasks. When coupled with the limitless influx of information, it often leads to a state of cognitive overload, characterized by a sense of anxiety, stress, and reduced productivity. The rise of the internet and smart devices has dramatically increased exposure to data. In fact, a report by Domo estimates that for every person on Earth, 1.7MB of data is created every second (Lau 2017). This information deluge, while offering unlimited opportunities for learning and connection, often pulls our attention in various directions, leading to fragmented focus and increased susceptibility to digital distractions. Digital overload can have a negative impact on our mental wellness. Establishing boundaries to reduce digital overload is crucial for maintaining our mental wellbeing in today's tech-driven world. Excessive use of digital devices can lead to increased stress, reduced productivity, sleep disturbances, and social isolation. Setting clear boundaries by designating tech-free zones and times, limiting social media usage, prioritizing offline activities, and establishing email and notification boundaries. Benefits of setting digital boundaries include reduced stress, improved focus and productivity, better sleep, and enhanced relationships. Regularly practice mindfulness and engage in digital detox to restore mental clarity and improve your overall relationship with technology. By implementing these strategies, we can reclaim control over our digital lives, reduce digital overload, and create a healthier balance between our online and offline worlds.

Key Words: Digital distractions, mindfulness, digital detox, digital overload

Introduction

The term ‘information overload’ has become a cliché nowadays, but it is the major problem that modern society faces. It is ubiquitous and impossible to quantify its extent. The information available now is astonishing and is still continuously growing. An accurate statistic is impossible to produce. This is an age of information explosion. The information database in the world is ever-expanding. The news media is also producing a large amount of information every minute. Information and communication became more cluttered. A digital media user receives thousands of information bits every moment, and his cognitive ability is unable to process this huge amount of data. News media organisations are passing through quick and inevitable changes. As in many areas of human life, the news media also welcomed new technologies. A huge change happens in no time, but soon countless problems arise. The available information became abundant. News, a part of existing information too, became excessive. During the past few years, the growth of social media has been quick. It helped to easily manipulate, duplicate, and share information. All information, including news content, is manipulated and faked. Thus, the problem became worse.

We are living in a world that has so much going on. The noise is loud and often interferes with our need to focus and get the most important tasks of the day done. Managing distractions, therefore, becomes an essential skill to have. The first step is to identify the distractions within your environment, as this will teach you how to manage and eliminate them.

In the digital age, information is ready to be accessed with a simple swipe or click. As the amount of available data exceeds the cognitive ability to process it, this vast resource of data also leads to information overload. This overload often breeds digital distractions, creating a significant challenge in our personal and professional lives. Hence, it is pertinent to explore the concept of digital distractions and information overload, their impacts, and how to manage them effectively.

Digital distractions refer to interruptions caused by digital technologies, such as emails, social media notifications, or smart phone alerts, that shift attention from immediate tasks. When coupled with the limitless influx of information, it often leads to a state of cognitive overload, characterised by a sense of anxiety and stress and reduced productivity. The rise of the internet and smart devices has dramatically increased exposure to data. In fact, a report by Domo estimates that for every person on Earth, 1.7MB of data is created every second (Lau 2017). This information deluge, while offering unlimited opportunities

for learning and connection, often pulls our attention in various directions, leading to fragmented focus and increased susceptibility to digital distractions.

Review of literature

In their framework model of the concept of information overload, Eppler and Mengis (2004) suggest that there are several interrelated causes of information overload: the characteristics of the person receiving the information, the characteristics of the information, tasks and processes, organizational processes, and information technology. The resulting consequences of information overload require the use of countermeasures, which, in turn, affect the causes of information overload.

This process is circular, and all the aspects are interdependent (Eppler and Mengis, 2004). Cognitive load theory suggests that the human working memory is limited to approximately seven $\pm$ two units of information (Atkinson and Shiffrin, 1968).

Accordingly, information overload occurs when the amount of information exceeds the working memory of the person receiving it (Graf and Antoni, 2020). Cognitive load theory identifies three different categories of cognitive load: extraneous, intrinsic, and germane cognitive load. Extraneous cognitive load is influenced by the design of the information (Sweller, 2005). Intrinsic cognitive load results from the content of the information, such as its complexity. Finally, germane cognitive load is the favorable, learning-enhancing cognitive load that results from focused engagement with the information. Ideally, this final form of cognitive load leads to the construction of schemata and mental models (Sweller, 2005). Media richness theory also provides a theoretical framework for studying information overload. One of the goals of using information and communication technology (ICT) is to reduce the ambiguity of information (Daft and Lengel, 1986). Therefore, information richness, which refers to the extent to which information can change understanding in a given time interval (Daft and Lengel, 1986), should be considered in relation to information overload. In addition to the information itself, the various possible communication channels may also differ in their richness. Face-to-face conversations are thought to be the richest form of communication, while letters or e-mails are less rich (Daft and Lengel, 1986; Kauffeld et al., 2016). Cognitive load theory provides a precise definition of information overload, while the media richness theory better supports the development of design interventions. Against the background of these relevant theories, the terms used in this study can be defined. Information overload is a topic that is relevant to many disciplines, including medicine, social sciences, marketing, computer science, education, and psychology (Edmunds and Morris, 2000). This means that there is no single, universally accepted definition. In everyday language, information overload is often equated with receiving too much information (Eppler and Mengis, 2004). According to Klausegger et al.

(2007), a consistent feature of the various scientific definitions of information overload is that the amount of information is initially related to better performance or better decisions but that, above a certain amount of information, the effect changes, and the amount of information leads to worse outcomes (an inverted U-shaped relationship; Eppler and Mengis, 2004; Klausegger et al., 2007). More specifically, Klapp (1986) defined information overload as an excessive amount of information that the receiver can no longer process efficiently without distraction, stress, increased errors, or other costs that reduce the efficient use of the information. Similarly, Eppler and Mengis (2004) argued that information overload occurs when the amount of information exceeds the processing capacity of the recipient. As mentioned above, information overload is closely related to the use of ICT and, therefore, also to the concept of technostress. Technostress can be defined as the “stress experienced by individuals due to the use of ICTs” (Ragu-Nathan et al., 2008, p. 418). Information overload and constant availability are the two main stressors caused by the use of ICTs (La Torre et al., 2019).

Therefore, information overload can be seen as a feature of techno stress. Although this review focuses on information overload, it also includes primary studies that refer to both techno stress and information overload. Five techno stressors are commonly discussed in the techno stress literature.

The studies included in this review cover a wide range of possible approaches to preventing or improving information overload. In terms of concrete information is concerned, it is important to clarify what information is actually relevant and to present this information in a clear and adaptive manner. The studies in this review present a variety of methods for managing large amounts of information for individual employees, some of which have been translated into concrete interventions. Clarifying and structuring team collaboration can also prevent information overload, and managers have a special role to play in this context.

Objectives of the study

1. To find out what the real causes and consequences of information overload are and how it affects ‘genuine information’
2. To analyse the impact of information overload on the impact of digital distractions
3. To examine the strategies for managing digital distractions
4. To suggest the benefits of digital boundaries

Research Methodology

The study has been done mainly on the basis of secondary data and information available from books, published works, and reports. This paper is based on case studies and

an analytical and logical understanding of various reports, journals, research papers, books, newspapers, and the internet.

Information overload is a situation where the presence of too much information prevents a person from finding the required information and causes difficulty in decision-making. It is also called fobesity or foxication. The information can be in the form of texts, images, sounds, videos, etc. The viral videos on YouTube, the countless emails in our inbox, the endless stream of interesting articles on Facebook, and the innumerable tweets per second on Twitter are some examples of overloaded information. The huge amount of information causes our brains to function stressfully. This will affect our thinking patterns. Our decision-making system will remain confused. It will stop us from making good decisions or interrupt us from choosing the right option. We will end up making wrong or delayed decisions. Information overload had been recognised and addressed as a problem long before the mid-nineteenth century. Scientists like J. Murray Luck, assistant professor of biochemistry at Stanford University, pointed out that they failed to reassemble appropriate information for their research work. Later, in 1963, a report of the U.S. President's Scientific Advisory Committee addressed the same problem. The phrase 'information overload' is first mentioned in 'The Managing of Organisations', a book by Bertram Gross published in 1964. But it was popularised by the futurologist Alvin Toffler in 1970 in his book 'Future Shock'. He predicted that information abundance will cause big problems in the near future. Information overload has become a menace in the academic and business sectors. When two or more types of information are available on the same subject or idea, there is a possibility of misperception. But here, the available information is literally massive. Digital media provides thousands of web pages in a fraction of a second in a single search. It becomes hardly possible to pick up the required bit of information within the available time. Information becomes useless when it cannot be accessed at the right time.

Nowadays, all media devices are digital in a sense. But, in this study, online media and equipment, including computers, smart phones, tablets, phablets, etc., are considered digital media. The World Wide Web became common for the last half century. The advent of modern computers caused information to duplicate and spread faster. Social media became a 'must' in everybody's life and allowed people to become news editors or manipulators. These duplicated pieces of information spread through the World Wide Web. Many of the details are manipulated. People started to access news content through digital media, which mainly included online media. Thus, digital media devices connected to the internet have a significant role in causing information overload.

Information Overload: Causes

Nowadays, devices with internet access, like computers, smartphones, tablets, and many other digital devices, are the major mediums for distributing information. A wide variety of sources are available for run-off information. Social media and other online resources are the primary cause of information overload. The same news item is repeatedly distributed from different news sources. This information could be fake, and its authenticity is always dubious. The primary reasons for information overload are:

1. Widespread access to the Internet
2. Rapid rate of new information production
3. Social media and internet sharing
4. Ease of information duplication and transmission
5. Increasing number of information channels with the same news content
6. Absence of tools to organise information
7. Lack of content filtering tools
8. Ignorance in accessing the sources using various information tools
9. Ambiguities in available information
10. Contradictions with newly-created information

Information Overload: Consequences

When considering the societal consequences, information overload always disrupts social development. It prevents accumulating new knowledge, thus delaying new inventions. Persons are the building blocks of society.

Thus, personal consequences do matter. Some of them are mentioned below:

1. Causes Untidiness
2. Kills Time
3. Increases stress and anxiety
4. Destroys self-confidence
5. Challenges cognitive capacity
6. Analysis Paralysis
7. Reduces Productivity
8. Fails to stay in focus
9. Stops taking decisions and actions.
10. Monetary Loses

Information concentration overload causes confusion in absorbing facts, which in turn reduces peace of mind. The lack of attention reduces work. Overloaded information causes

us to lose precious time. Thus, we will lose productive outcomes. Information overload leads to spending more time catching the necessary information. This reduces the available time and causes stress and anxiety. Information overload often causes analysis paralysis, or paralysis by analysis. It is a state of never taking a decision or action by overthinking (analysing) and, as a result, paralysing the outcome.

The Impact of Digital Distractions

Studies have revealed that digital disruptions have significant implications.

Reduced Productivity: Constantly switching tasks lowers efficiency and can delay the completion of primary tasks.

Increased Stress: Dealing with persistent digital interruptions and the pressure to stay updated can lead to mental fatigue and stress.

Impaired Cognitive Function: Continuous partial attention to various information streams can affect memory, creativity, and deep thinking.

Disturbed Work-Life Balance: The boundary between work and personal life often gets blurred in the digital age, leading to an always-on work culture and less time for relaxation and rejuvenation.

Digital overload and mental health

Digital overload has a significant impact on mental health. Constant exposure to digital devices and the need to stay connected at all times can lead to higher stress levels. The fear of missing out (FOMO), constantly checking email or social media, and the pressure to respond immediately can take a toll on our mental wellbeing. Digital overload can hinder our ability to focus and concentrate on important tasks. The constant interruptions and distractions from emails, notifications, and social media can significantly reduce productivity. Spending excessive time on digital devices, especially before bedtime, can disrupt our sleep patterns. The blue light emitted by screens can interfere with the production of melatonin, the hormone that regulates sleep. Excessive screen time can harm our real-life social connections. Instead of engaging in face-to-face conversations or spending quality time with loved ones, we may find ourselves glued to our devices, missing out on valuable social interactions. Scrolling through social media feeds and constantly checking emails can distract us from important tasks, reducing our overall productivity. Social media platforms often paint an unrealistic picture of others' lives, leading to feelings of inadequacy and lower self-esteem.

Strategies for Managing Digital Distractions

Managing digital distractions requires conscious effort and effective strategies to regulate our interaction with digital technologies. Some techniques proven to be fruitful are:

Mindful Technology Use: Cultivating the habit of using technology mindfully is crucial. This awareness can help break the automatic response to digital cues.

Digital Detox: Allocating specific periods for a digital detox—a time to disconnect from all digital devices. This break can help reduce dependency on technology and improve focus. Some ways are: planning dedicated periods of time, such as weekends or vacations, to disconnect from all digital devices; engaging in hobbies or activities that do not involve screens, such as reading a book, spending time in nature, or pursuing a creative outlet; Setting realistic goals for reducing screen time gradually allows your mind and body to adjust.

Prioritisation and Task Management: Prioritising tasks based on urgency and importance. Using tools and techniques like the Eisenhower Matrix, Pomodoro Technique, or time blocking to manage tasks effectively.

Use of Technology to Limit Technology: Using apps and software designed to limit distractions, such as website blockers or tools that monitor and limit screen time.

Create a Distraction-Free Workspace: Keeping the workspace clutter-free and devoid of unnecessary digital devices.

Setting Boundaries: Establishing clear boundaries for digital usage to ensure a healthy balance between the online and offline worlds, like designating tech-free zones or times during the day; Turning off non-essential notifications to minimise distractions and interruptions; creating a schedule for checking and responding to emails and social media, rather than constantly being available.

Practicing mindfulness: taking regular breaks from digital devices and engaging in activities that promote relaxation and mental clarity, such as meditation or going for a walk. Avoid multitasking and focus on one task at a time, giving it your full attention. Practice deep breathing exercises to reduce stress and improve overall mental wellbeing.

Notifications Management: Managing notifications effectively to reduce digital overload. Turning off non-essential notifications, prioritising important ones, and limiting the number of messaging and social media apps on your devices.

Establish Tech-Free Zones: Creating designated tech-free zones in the home or workspace. These zones can be sacred spaces for relaxation and connection with the real world.

Practicing Single-Tasking: Multitasking may seem efficient, but it often leads to decreased productivity and increased stress. Practicing single-tasking by focusing on one task at a time and giving it complete attention and energy promotes a sense of accomplishment and reduces mental clutter.

Encourage face-to-face interaction by making an effort to prioritise face-to-face interactions with friends for coffee, having a family game night, or attending local events. Human connections play a crucial role in boosting our mental wellness.

Digital overload and mental well-being

Managing digital overload is crucial for maintaining our mental wellbeing. By setting boundaries, practicing mindfulness, and incorporating regular digital detoxes into our lives, we can effectively manage our technology usage and prevent the negative consequences of digital overload. Digital overload can lead to increased stress, decreased productivity, sleep disturbances, and impaired social interactions. Set boundaries by designating tech-free zones, turning off non-essential notifications, and creating a schedule for digital usage. Practice mindfulness to stay present, reduce distractions, and enhance mental clarity. Plan and execute digital detoxes to recharge and rejuvenate.

By implementing these strategies,

While individual efforts are critical, organisations also have a role to play in managing digital distractions. Businesses can cultivate a culture that values deep work, encourages mindful use of technology, and respects digital boundaries. Training and workshops on digital wellness can equip employees with the necessary skills to navigate the digital world without getting overwhelmed by distractions. Digital distractions and information overload are the defining challenges of the 21st century, affecting our productivity, mental health, and overall quality of life. By understanding these issues and implementing effective management strategies, we can leverage the benefits of the digital age without falling prey to its pitfalls.

Prioritising self-care and finding a balance between our digital lives and well-being is essential in today's fast-paced world. By establishing boundaries, engaging in offline activities, and practicing mindfulness, we can overcome digital overload and nourish our mental wellness. Remember, embracing self-care is not an indulgence but a necessity for a healthy and fulfilling life.

Benefits of Digital Boundaries

Setting boundaries in the digital world brings numerous advantages to our mental wellbeing and quality of life. By limiting our exposure to constant notifications and information overload, we can significantly reduce stress levels. Setting boundaries allows us to concentrate on tasks without constant digital distractions, resulting in increased productivity. By establishing tech-free zones and limiting screen time before bed, we can improve the quality of our sleep and wake up feeling refreshed. Prioritising offline interactions fosters stronger connections with family and friends, reducing feelings of social isolation.

Conclusion

Digital overload can have a negative impact on our mental wellness. Establishing boundaries to reduce digital overload is crucial for maintaining our mental wellbeing in

today's tech-driven world. Excessive use of digital devices can lead to increased stress, reduced productivity, sleep disturbances, and social isolation. Setting clear boundaries by designating tech-free zones and times, limiting social media usage, prioritising offline activities, and establishing email and notification boundaries. Benefits of setting digital boundaries include reduced stress, improved focus and productivity, better sleep, and enhanced relationships. Regularly practice mindfulness and engage in digital detox to restore mental clarity and improve your overall relationship with technology. By implementing these strategies, we can reclaim control over our digital lives, reduce digital overload, and create a healthier balance between our online and offline worlds.

Mindfulness techniques such as meditation, digital detox, deep breathing exercises, and practicing gratitude can help combat digital overload. Benefits of mindfulness include improved focus, reduced stress levels, better sleep quality, enhanced self-awareness, and increased resilience. Incorporating mindfulness into our daily lives is essential for finding balance and promoting mental well-being in the digital age.

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