Exploring The Impact of Social Media Utilization on Perceived Information Overload: The Mediating Role of Information Disorder Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms provide numerous benefits, such as global connectivity and rapid information sharing, but they also pose significant challenges, including managing interactions and assessing content reliability. Many users report feeling overwhelmed by excessive information and uncertainty regarding its accuracy. This study explores three research questions: (i) How does social media utilization influence perceived information disorder experience? (ii) How does social media utilization influence perceived information overload? and (iii) To what extent does perceived information disorder experience mediate the relationship between social media utilization and information overload? Using an online questionnaire, data were collected from Malaysian internet users to measure key constructs. The findings reveal that social media utilization is positively associated with perceived information disorder experience. However, the direct link between social media utilization and information overload was not significant. Importantly, perceived information disorder experience mediates this relationship. These findings have practical implications for social media designers, policymakers, and educators. Designers should address algorithmic biases that prioritize engagement over content accuracy, reducing exposure to disinformation. Policymakers can advocate for stricter content moderation regulations and tools for identifying unreliable information. Educators can enhance media literacy programs, equipping users to critically evaluate information and mitigate the negative effects of information disorder and overload.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a ubiquitous presence in the lives of people worldwide, with its accessibility and functionality making it an essential part of daily routines. The convenience of staying connected, sharing experiences, and accessing real-time updates has made platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and

Instagram household names (Nguyen et al., 2022). However, this widespread integration has also fueled an obsession, where individuals often find themselves spending excessive time on these platforms, sometimes at the expense of other priorities. This growing dependency underscores the significant influence of social media on human behavior and societal norms.

While social media offers numerous benefits, such as fostering global connections and enabling the rapid dissemination of information, its downsides are equally prominent (Tarigan et al., 2023). Among these are the increasing complexities users face in managing their interactions and engagements on these platforms. Many individuals report experiencing overwhelming exposure to content and confusion about the accuracy or reliability of the information encountered (Heiss, Nanz & Matthes, 2023). These challenges have created a need to examine how social media usage impacts users' experiences and whether these effects are shaping broader concerns about the role of digital platforms in everyday life.

Information overload occurs when the sheer volume of content becomes unmanageable, leaving users overwhelmed and unable to effectively process or prioritize information (Arnold, Goldschmitt & Rigotti, 2023). Simultaneously, information disorder arises from the prevalence of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation on these platforms, further complicating users' experiences (Monsees, 2023). Studies have shown that social media may have a bearing on both information overload and information disorder (Kirchknopf, Slijepčević & Zeppelzauer, 2021; Sheng at al., 2023). However, much of the existing research has focused on these issues independently, without exploring how they might be interconnected or influenced by the way individuals engage with social media. Specifically, there is limited understanding of how social media utilization simultaneously contributes to users feeling overwhelmed by excessive information and exposed to unreliable or distorted content. Additionally, while some studies have examined the individual effects of social media, the mediating role of information disorder in the relationship between social media use and information overload remains underexplored. Specifically, this study is aimed to answer the following research questions: (i) How does social media utilization influence perceived information disorder experience?, (ii) How does social media utilization influence perceived information overload experience? and (iii) To what extent do perceived information disorder experience mediate the relationship between social media utilization and perceived information overload experience?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Information Overload

Information overload has become a pervasive issue in the modern digital era, where individuals are inundated with vast amounts of information from various sources (Balabbes et al., 2023). The rise of social media, 24-hour news cycles, and real-time communication platforms has drastically increased the volume and speed at which information is produced and consumed (Nuzuli, 2024). While access to diverse information is advantageous, the excessive and unmanageable nature of this content often overwhelms users. As a result, individuals face significant challenges in filtering, organizing, and making sense of the information they encounter, leading to a phenomenon widely recognized as information overload (Shahrzadi et al., 2024).

The causes of information overload are multifaceted and include both external and internal factors. On the technological front, the continuous flow of notifications, algorithm-driven content recommendations, and the proliferation of digital communication channels bombard users with an unrelenting stream of information (Urgellés-Molina, & Herrero, 2024). Social media platforms, in particular, encourage constant engagement through personalized feeds and updates, often promoting quantity over quality. Internally, individual behaviors such as multitasking, compulsive browsing, and the fear of missing out (FOMO) intensify the problem (Masrek & Baharuddin, 2023). A lack of effective tools or strategies to manage this influx of data further exacerbates the overload, leaving users struggling to cope with the overwhelming amount of content.

The impacts of information overload are far-reaching, affecting cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions of individuals' lives (Wang et al., 2022). Cognitively, it can impair decision-making and reduce the ability to focus, as individuals struggle to process or prioritize relevant information (Peng, Xu & Huang, 2021). Emotionally, it often leads to stress, frustration, and burnout, diminishing users' overall well-being (Shahrzadi et al., 2024). Behaviorally, it can result in reduced productivity, avoidance of decision-making, and even disengagement from valuable information sources (McDowall, 2022). These consequences highlight the importance of addressing information overload, both through the development of better information management tools and fostering awareness of how digital engagement can be optimized for a healthier and more effective interaction with information.

Information Disorder

Information disorder refers to the spread of false, misleading, or harmful information in various forms, disrupting the ability to discern truth from falsehood (Monsees, 2023). It manifests as misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (Mukhopadhyay & Shah, 2022). Misinformation involves sharing incorrect information without malicious intent, disinformation is the deliberate creation and dissemination of false information to deceive, and malinformation uses accurate information with the intent to harm (Wardle, & Derakhshan, 2017). The prevalence of information disorder has grown significantly with the rise of social media and digital platforms, where content spreads rapidly, often without proper verification. This phenomenon challenges individuals, organizations, and societies, undermining trust and distorting public discourse.

The determining factors of information disorder are complex and multifaceted. Technological factors, such as algorithm-driven recommendations and real-time information dissemination, amplify false or harmful content by prioritizing engagement over accuracy (Lee & Jia, 2023). Social factors, like echo chambers, where users encounter information that aligns with their existing beliefs, reduce exposure to diverse perspectives and critical evaluation (Vo, 2023). Psychological factors also play a crucial role, as emotional triggers such as fear, outrage, or confirmation bias drive individuals to share content without verifying its authenticity. Additionally, the lack of robust content moderation policies and accountability mechanisms on digital platforms contributes to the unchecked proliferation of information disorder.

The effects of information disorder are wide-ranging and impactful, affecting individuals, organizations, businesses, and even entire nations. For individuals, it can lead to confusion, stress, and poor decision-making as they struggle to identify credible information (Klien, 2023). Organizations and businesses face reputational damage, loss of consumer trust, and financial harm when targeted by false narratives or malicious campaigns. On a broader scale, countries experience polarization, erosion of public trust in institutions, and potential threats to democratic processes, as seen in cases of election interference or the spread of harmful public health misinformation (Buehler et al., 2021). Addressing these effects requires a comprehensive approach, including promoting media literacy, implementing stricter regulations on digital platforms, and fostering a culture of critical engagement with information (Damasceno, 2021).

Social Media

Social media refers to digital platforms and applications that enable users to create, share, and interact with content and connect with others in real-time (Aichner et al., 2021). These platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok, have transformed communication and information exchange, offering individuals and organizations a way to engage with global audiences. Social media has become an integral part of modern life, fostering relationships, facilitating knowledge sharing, and providing entertainment (Creevey, Coughlan & O'Connor, 2022). Its accessibility and ease of use have made it a cornerstone of digital interaction across various demographics and professions.

People use social media for a wide range of reasons, including staying connected with friends and family, networking professionally, and accessing information (Valkunberg, 2022). For many, social media serves as a source of entertainment, self-expression, and personal branding, while others use it to stay

informed about current events or engage in activism. Businesses and organizations leverage social media for marketing, customer engagement, and building brand loyalty. The personalization features of these platforms, driven by algorithms, ensure that users are consistently exposed to content tailored to their interests, making social media highly engaging and, for some, indispensable (Serrano-Malebran & Arenas-Gaitan, 2021).

However, the excessive use of social media has become a growing concern, with many individuals spending disproportionate amounts of time scrolling, posting, and interacting online (Marttila, Koivula, & Räsänen, 2021). This excessive engagement can lead to social media addiction, a condition characterized by compulsive and uncontrollable use of these platforms. Social media addiction often manifests in behaviors such as neglecting responsibilities, prioritizing online interactions over real-world relationships, and experiencing anxiety or distress when unable to access these platforms (Al-Samarraie et al., 2022). The addictive nature of social media is driven by features like endless scrolling, instant notifications, and the dopamine rewards of likes and comments, creating a cycle that can be difficult to break. This overuse not only affects mental health and productivity but also raises questions about the long-term societal impacts of digital dependency.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Perceived information overload experience refers to the extent to which individuals feel overwhelmed by the volume, complexity, and speed of information they encounter (Arnold, Goldschmitt & Rigotti, 2023). It reflects their subjective perception of an inability to process, prioritize, or make sense of the information available to them, often leading to cognitive fatigue, stress, and decision-making challenges. This experience is particularly prominent in environments where individuals are exposed to constant streams of content, such as social media platforms, digital communication channels, and other information-rich contexts.

Perceived Information Disorder Experience refers to the extent to which individuals encounter and recognize the presence of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation in the information they consume (Wardle, & Derakhshan, 2017). It reflects their subjective awareness of being exposed to false, misleading, or maliciously manipulated content, which may distort their understanding or decision-making processes. This experience highlights the individual's perception of the prevalence and impact of unreliable information in their daily interactions with various communication channels, particularly digital and social media platforms.

Social Media Utilization refers to the extent to which individuals actively engage with social media platforms, measured by the number of accounts they frequently use on a daily basis (Supardi et al., 2021). It encompasses various activities, including content consumption, creation, sharing, and interaction with others, reflecting the depth and breadth of their engagement. This utilization highlights users' reliance on social media as a primary means of communication, information acquisition, and social connection.

Perceived information disorder experience, which involves exposure to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, complicates the process of interpreting and processing information (Wardle, & Derakhshan, 2017). This cognitive challenge increases the mental load on individuals, exacerbating feelings of information overload. The inability to filter credible content effectively amplifies the sense of being overwhelmed by the volume and complexity of information. Prior research highlights that distorted or unreliable information contributes significantly to users' difficulties in managing their informational environments (Tandoc & Seet, 2022). Hence, the following hypothesis is developed:

H1: Perceived Information Disorder experience has a positive and significant relationship with perceived information overload experience

Frequent engagement with social media platforms exposes users to vast amounts of diverse content, often presented in a continuous stream. The constant flow of notifications, posts, and algorithmically

recommended content can overwhelm users' cognitive capacities, making it difficult to process or prioritize information (Kolhar, Kazi, & Alameen, 2021). Studies have shown that increased social media usage is correlated with higher instances of information overload due to the sheer volume of content and the pressure to keep up with updates and interactions (Sheng et al., 2023). Accordingly, the following hypothesis if put forward:

H2: Social Media Utilization has a positive and significant relationship with perceived information overload experience

The high level of engagement with social media platforms increases individuals' exposure to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation (Zheng & Cao, 2022). Social media algorithms often prioritize engagement over accuracy, amplifying the likelihood of encountering distorted or false content. As users interact with an increasing number of accounts and posts, their risk of encountering unreliable information grows, contributing to perceived information disorder experience. This relationship is supported by research linking social media usage to higher susceptibility to misinformation and other forms of information disorder. To this effect, the study develops the following hypothesis:

H3: Social Media Utilization has a positive and significant relationship with perceived information disorder experience

Social media utilization leads to increased exposure to unreliable information, which constitutes perceived information disorder experience. This disorder, in turn, complicates users' ability to process and manage information, contributing to perceived information overload *experience*

 . Hence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4: Perceived information disorder experience mediates the relationship between Social Media Utilization and perceived information overload experience
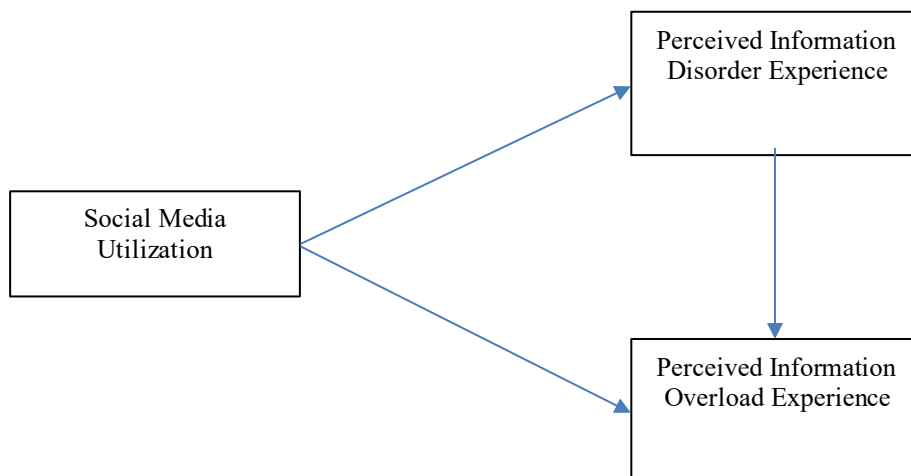

Figure 1: Theoretical Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical framework of the study, which examines the relationships between Social Media Utilization, Perceived Information Disorder Experience, and Perceived Information Overload Experience.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed a survey method to collect data, utilizing an online questionnaire distributed to Malaysian internet users. The questionnaire included items specifically designed to measure the study constructs. The items for Perceived Information Disorder Experience were self-developed, drawing on the definitions and frameworks proposed by Wardle & Derakhshan (2017) and Gradon et al. (2021). For Perceived Information Overload Experience, the items were adapted from the validated scale developed by Williamson, Eaker & Lounsbury (2012). To measure Social Media Utilization, a single-item approach was employed. Respondents were presented with a list of popular social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Pinterest, and others, and were asked to indicate which platforms they used frequently on an almost daily basis. The total number of platforms selected by each respondent was then calculated to represent their level of social media utilization. This method provides a straightforward and quantifiable measure of the diversity of social media engagement across platforms. Prior to the actual data collection, the questionnaire underwent pre-testing and pilot testing, following the guidelines recommended by Masrek & Heriyanto (2021), to ensure its reliability and validity. Pre-testing was conducted with a panel of experts and prospective respondents who evaluated the questionnaire for accuracy, clarity, and relevance. The feedback from this process indicated that the instrument was generally well-designed, with no significant revisions required. Subsequently, a pilot test was carried out involving 30 randomly selected Malaysian netizens. The analysis revealed that the reliability coefficients for all constructs exceeded the threshold of 0.7, demonstrating strong internal consistency and affirming the reliability of the questionnaire for further data collection

To facilitate data collection, SurveyMonkey was subscribed to as a platform for administering the questionnaire. The target population comprised Malaysian internet users, and purposive sampling was employed to reach individuals with relevant social media experience. This sampling approach ensured that participants were familiar with the phenomena under investigation (Robinson, 2024). The survey questions captured participants' perceptions of information disorder experience, information overload experience, and social media utilization, aligning with the study's conceptual framework.

For data analysis, SmartPLS version 4.0 was utilized, as the study adopted the Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling (PLS-SEM) approach. This technique was chosen due to its suitability for testing complex relationships among latent constructs and its robustness in handling small to medium sample sizes. The analysis involved assessing the measurement model to ensure construct reliability and validity, followed by evaluating the structural model to test the hypothesized relationships. This methodological approach provided a comprehensive examination of the research hypotheses and contributed to the study's overall rigor and reliability.

FINDINGS

The majority of the participants (72.4%) were female, reflecting a common trend in Malaysian university settings. The largest age group was 20–29 years, representing 88.1% of the respondents, with smaller proportions aged 30–39 (5.7%) and 40–49 (6.0%).

In terms of academic program levels, most respondents (78.7%) were pursuing Bachelor's degrees, followed by Master's students (10.2%) and PhD candidates (4.5%). Additionally, the analysis of fields of study reveals that 82.1% of the respondents were from social sciences and management disciplines, with 13.4% studying engineering and technology. These demographic details indicate a diverse sample, providing a comprehensive view of Malaysian university students' perceptions.

Table 1 presents the assessment of convergent validity for the constructs using factor loadings, composite reliability (CR), and average variance extracted (AVE). For Perceived Information Disorder Experience, all factor loadings exceed the recommended threshold of 0.6, with values ranging from 0.689 to 0.751, indicating strong item reliability. The composite reliability for this construct is 0.890, surpassing

the acceptable threshold of 0.7, and the AVE is 0.502, meeting the minimum requirement of 0.5, thus confirming adequate convergent validity (Hair et al., 2019). For Perceived Information Overload Experience, the factor loadings range from 0.645 to 0.765, demonstrating that all items contribute meaningfully to the construct. The composite reliability is 0.903, further validating internal consistency, and the AVE is 0.509, indicating that more than 50% of the variance in the construct is explained by its items (Hair et al., 2019). Overall, the results confirm that both constructs meet the criteria for convergent validity, ensuring the reliability and validity of the measurement model.

As previously mentioned, Social Media Utilization was measured using a single-item approach, based on the total number of social media platforms with which respondents actively engage or interact on an almost daily basis. Given the nature of this single-item measure, it is not applicable to assess convergent or discriminant validity, as these forms of validity are typically relevant only to multi-item constructs within a scale.

Table 1: Assessment of Convergent Validity

Construct	Item Code	Factor Loading	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted
Perceived Information Disorder Experience	InfoDis1	0.700	0.890	0.502
	InfoDis2	0.751		
	InfoDis3	0.717		
	InfoDis4	0.714		
	InfoDis5	0.709		
	InfoDis6	0.689		
	InfoDis7	0.693		
	InfoDis8	0.692		
Perceived Information Overload Experience	InfoOvld1	0.765	0.903	0.509
	InfoOvld2	0.676		
	InfoOvld3	0.710		
	InfoOvld4	0.657		
	InfoOvld5	0.752		
	InfoOvld6	0.761		
	InfoOvld7	0.692		
	InfoOvld8	0.645		
	InfoOvld9	0.753		

Table 2 assesses discriminant validity using the Fornell & Larcker (1981) criterion. The square root of the AVE for Perceived Disinformation Experience (0.708) and Perceived Information Overload Experience (0.714) are greater than their mutual correlation (0.317). This confirms adequate discriminant validity, indicating that the constructs are distinct and appropriately measured within the model (Hair et al., 2019).

Table 2: Assessment of Discriminant Validity

	Perceived Disinformation Experience	Perceived Information Overload Experience
Perceived Disinformation Experience	0.708	

Perceived Information Overload Experience	0.317	0.714

Table 3 presents the structural model analysis results, testing the relationships between social media engagement, perceived disinformation experience, and perceived information overload experience. For H1, perceived disinformation experience is positively and significantly related to perceived information overload experience ($\beta = 0.314$, T-value = 6.81, $p < 0.001$), supporting the hypothesis. Conversely, H2 is rejected, as the relationship between social media engagement and perceived information overload experience is not significant ($\beta = 0.032$, T-value = 0.574, $p = 0.283$) (Hair et al., 2019).
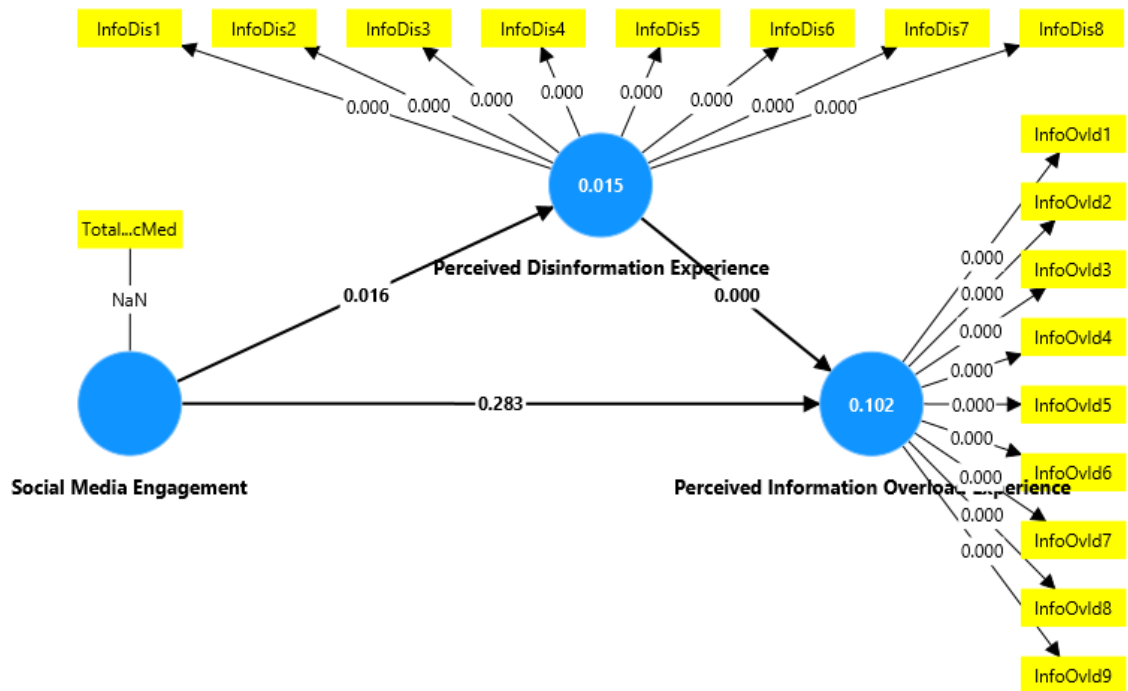

Figure 2: Structural Model Analysis

H3 is supported, with social media engagement positively influencing perceived disinformation experience ($\beta = 0.121$, T-value = 2.146, $p = 0.016$). For H4, the mediating effect of perceived disinformation experience between social media engagement and perceived information overload experience is significant ($\beta = 0.038$, T-value = 1.873, $p = 0.031$), highlighting an indirect pathway. The R^2 value for perceived information overload experience (0.102) meets the adequacy threshold suggested by Falk and Miller (1992), while the R^2 for perceived disinformation experience (0.015) falls below this threshold. According to Cohen's (1988) guideline, both values are considered weak.

Table 3: Path Analysis and Hypothesis Testing Results

	β	T-value	P values	R^2	F^2	Hypothesis
H1: Perceived Disinformation Experience → Perceived Information Overload Experience	0.314	6.81	0	0.102	0.001	Supported

H2: Social Media Engagement → Perceived Information Overload Experience	0.032	0.574	0.283			Not Supported
H3: Social Media Engagement → Perceived Disinformation Experience	0.121	2.146	0.016	0.015	0.015	Supported
H4: Social Media Engagement →Perceived Disinformation Experience →Perceived Information Overload Experience	0.038	1.873	0.031			Supported

DISCUSSION

RQ1: How does social media utilization influence perceived information disorder experiences?

The findings reveal that social media utilization has a positive and significant relationship with perceived information disorder experiences. This supports H3, indicating that frequent engagement with social media platforms increases individuals' exposure to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation. Social media algorithms, which prioritize engagement over accuracy (Zheng & Cao, 2022), amplify the spread of unreliable content, creating an environment where users are more likely to encounter distorted information. This aligns with prior studies, such as those by Wardle & Derakhshan (2017), which emphasize that social media fosters information disorder by promoting content that elicits emotional responses. Therefore, the results underscore the critical need to address algorithmic biases and promote media literacy to reduce exposure to false or manipulative content (Afrilyasanti et al., 2023).

RQ2: How does social media utilization influence perceived information overload experiences?

The results indicate that the direct relationship between social media utilization and perceived information overload experiences is not significant, leading to the rejection of H2. This finding suggests that the mere frequency or intensity of social media usage does not directly result in information overload. Instead, the relationship might be influenced by intermediary factors, such as the type or quality of content encountered. The plausible reasons for the non-support of H2 may lie in several underlying factors. First, the type, relevance, and quality of content consumed on social media platforms may play a significant role in moderating the relationship between usage and perceived information overload experience (Eppler, 2015). If users predominantly engage with relevant or curated content, the likelihood of feeling overwhelmed might decrease, regardless of the frequency or intensity of their usage. Additionally, individual coping mechanisms, such as filtering information, muting notifications, or setting specific usage boundaries, may mitigate the direct impact of social media use on information overload experience (Aussu, 2023). Furthermore, platform-specific features that prioritize personalization and content relevance, such as algorithmic curation, may also contribute to reducing the perception of overload (Bhattacharya, 2024). These features help streamline the user experience, making it less likely for frequent use alone to result in an overwhelming flow of information. Another consideration is that information overload experience is inherently a multidimensional construct that encompasses emotional, cognitive, and temporal factors (Belabbes et al., 2023). It is possible that the intensity of social media usage does not directly account for all these dimensions, suggesting the presence of intermediary factors that influence the experience of overload.

RQ3: To what extent do perceived information disorder experience mediate the relationship between social media utilization and perceived information overload experiences?

The findings confirm that perceived information disorder experiencemediate the relationship between social media utilization and perceived information overload experiences, supporting H4. This suggests that while social media utilization alone does not directly cause information overload experience, it does so indirectly by increasing exposure to disinformation, misinformation, and malinformation. This finding is consistent with Wardle & Derakhshan's (2017) assertion that information disorder complicates users' ability to process and prioritize information, thereby exacerbating feelings of overload. The mediating role of information disorder highlights the interconnected nature of these phenomena and emphasizes the need for strategies to mitigate the spread of unreliable content to reduce its cascading effects on user cognition and well-being.

These findings collectively contribute to the understanding of the complex interplay between social media engagement, perceived information disorder experience, and perceived information overload experience, aligning with existing literature (Sheng et al., 2023; Tandoc & Seet, 2022). They also suggest practical implications for content moderation, digital platform design, and media literacy initiatives to address these challenges.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to the growing body of research on social media utilization, perceived information disorder experience, and perceived information overload experience by providing empirical insights into their interrelationships. From a theoretical perspective, the study extends existing frameworks by highlighting the mediating role of perceived information disorder experience in the relationship between social media utilization and perceived information overload experience. It demonstrates that while social media engagement does not directly lead to perceived information overload experience, the indirect effect through exposure to misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation is significant. These findings enrich the understanding of how digital platforms shape cognitive and emotional experiences, offering a foundation for future research to explore additional mediators or moderators.

Practically, the study provides actionable insights for social media platform designers, policymakers, and educators. For platform designers, the findings underscore the importance of mitigating algorithmic biases that prioritize engagement over content accuracy, which amplifies exposure to disinformation. Policymakers can use these insights to advocate for stricter regulations on content moderation and encourage the development of tools to identify and flag unreliable information. Educators can leverage these findings to promote media literacy programs that equip users with the skills to critically evaluate information, reducing the negative impacts of both information disorder and overload.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the reliance on purposive sampling limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations. Future studies should consider more representative sampling techniques to validate the results. Second, the study focused solely on Malaysian internet users, which may not fully capture cultural or regional differences in social media usage and its effects. Comparative studies across diverse cultural contexts are recommended to enhance understanding. Lastly, the study employed cross-sectional data, which limits the ability to infer causality. Longitudinal studies are needed to explore the temporal dynamics of the relationships among social media utilization, information disorder, and information overload.

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