

The Impact of Information Overload on Preferences for Tourism Information Media

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Abstract:

In the context of widespread mobile internet and smart device adoption, tourism information dissemination has entered an “all-media era.” While offering convenience, information overload poses significant challenges to tourists, exceeding their processing capacity and leading to cognitive confusion, reduced decision-making efficiency, and negative emotional responses. Through qualitative analysis and systematic literature review, this study examines how information overload influences tourists’ media selection preferences, emphasizing the mediating role of source credibility and platform trust mechanisms. Findings indicate that overload not only heightens cognitive and emotional strain but also indirectly drives users toward more authoritative and transparent media sources. Platforms can mitigate these effects through information simplification, trust-building features, and user education. This research provides theoretical and practical insights for designing more trustworthy and efficient tourism information environments.

Keywords: information overload; tourism information media; source credibility; trust mechanism; media selection preference

1. Introduction

As mobile internet technologies have become deeply embedded in daily life and smart devices are now widespread, the way tourism information is communicated has entered an “all-media era”. The China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), in its 55th Statistical Report on China’s Internet Development, reports that by December 2024 there were 548 million users booking travel online, an increase of 39.35 million since December 2023 representing 49.5% of all internet users. At the same time, the problem of “information overload” has become in-

creasingly apparent. Modern travellers, in particular, experience this keenly. The common situation of “scrolling through Xiaohongshu for two hours and still not knowing where to go” neatly illustrates the contemporary traveler’s “choice paradox”. When travel guides, destination suggestions, user reviews and influencer check-ins flood the scene, information intended to help decision-making can instead obstruct it, resulting in mental confusion, higher decision costs, lower efficiency and sometimes choices contrary to initial goals. The piling up of conflicting information intensifies consumers’ decision difficulties and can provoke emotional responses that lead

them to switch to other information platforms or media [1-3].

By contrast, newer media forms like social networks, online travel agencies (OTAs) and user-generated content (UGC) are characterised by volume, immediacy and variety, and have fundamentally changed how tourism information is produced, shared and consumed [4,5]. Yet this information surge also raises concerns about authenticity, reliability and usefulness. Consequently, understanding how information overload influences travellers' media preferences, and finding ways to help them pinpoint reliable media amid vast content, is a pressing issue in current research on tourist consumer behaviour.

2. Definition of related concepts

2.1 Information overload.

Information overload occurs when someone receives too much information in a certain time. This amount of information exceeds their ability to process it. The result is often a feeling of mental disorientation. It also leads to higher costs in decision-making and reduced efficiency. Sometimes, the outcomes can even oppose the user's original goal.

Chung and colleagues studied young adults in China who use short-video apps [1]. They found that perceived information overload directly increases a user's intention to stop using these apps. This relationship is mediated by several factors. These mediators include social media fatigue, maladaptive coping, and life dissatisfaction. This shows that information overload can cause psychological fatigue. It also promotes negative emotions, which harms continued media use.

Tian et al. used the stressor-strain-outcome (SSO) model in their research [2]. They studied social media users in Malaysia. Their work showed that perceived overload leads to cognitive fatigue. This happens because overload causes emotional exhaustion and anxiety. These states then predict social media cognitive fatigue. Together, these studies prove that information overload significantly affects mental health and media behavior.

Furthermore, Agnihotri et al. demonstrated another effect of overload [3]. They studied social media influencer information overload (SMIIO). They found that SMIIO substantially increases a customer's tendency to avoid purchases. Customer confusion mediates this link between SMIIO and purchase avoidance. However, prior product knowledge can weaken the effect of SMIIO on confusion. This indicates that information overload influences more than just media engagement. It also directly shapes consumer purchasing choices and behavior.

2.2 Credibility of information sources.

The perceived credibility of an information source re-

flects the level of trust audiences assign to it, a concept principally composed of two attributes: expertise and trustworthiness. Expertise indicates the depth of knowledge and proficiency a source holds within a specialized area, whereas trustworthiness encompasses the perceived objectivity, impartiality, and genuineness of the source's motives. From the standpoint of information source credibility, Wang Kelin [6] analyzed how consumers evaluate the value of information sources. This investigation incorporated the influence of user involvement and herd mentality on purchasing decisions, leading to the development of a conceptual model. This model outlines the process through which perceived credibility shapes consumers' purchase intentions, illustrating that credibility operates not as a fixed trait but as an ongoing process of perception and assessment. Further emphasizing a foundational element, Jiang Meihua and Liang Jingjing [7] asserted in their research on online self-media's impact on young women's travel behavior that "the authenticity of information on online self-media platforms is the foundation of all trust relationships." This statement highlights the critical function of truthful information in establishing relational trust. Moreover, within settings of information overload, the widespread presence of misleading content, hyperbole, and subjective opinions elevates information authenticity to a central concern for travelers when judging source credibility.

2.3 Traditional media and new media

Traditional media and new media are two major categories in communication studies distinguished by technological evolution and media forms. Traditional media refers to the communication media that existed and were widely used long before the widespread application of the internet and digital technologies, mainly including newspapers, magazines, television and radio media forms that distribute content via physical carriers or analogue signals. New media, by contrast, refers to communication forms that rely on emerging technologies such as the internet, digital technology and mobile communications to provide information and services to users via terminals like computers, smartphones and digital television; typical examples include social media platforms, vertical websites and various mobile applications. The two differ significantly in technological foundations, dissemination mechanisms and modes of audience interaction, reflecting the evolutionary trend of media from one-way transmission towards interactivity, digitisation and platformisation.

3. The Central Role of Source Credibility and Trust Mechanisms in Media Selection

In the contemporary context of information saturation, individuals are confronted with an overwhelming volume of

data. This is particularly evident in the domain of travel, where users must sift through extensive material to evaluate truthfulness, determine usefulness, and ultimately make decisions. Within this environment, the perceived credibility of information sources is of critical importance. Furthermore, the trust-building mechanisms instituted by digital platforms play an equally pivotal role. Users do not hold static media preferences; instead, they engage in a process of continuous reassessment. Their choices are perpetually refined based on dynamic evaluations of a source's authoritative standing, the substantive quality of its content, and the robustness of the protections afforded by the platform.

3.1 Source Credibility

Studies indicate that how much consumers trust different information sources significantly affects which media they choose. Neutral content from aggregated or specialist websites tends to be trusted more, whereas commercial advertising is trusted least and often pushes users toward more authoritative platforms. Identity signals matter too: institutional accounts and professional opinion leaders carry more credibility, so when platform content is mixed or unverified, users seek out more authoritative channels [8]. The level of user involvement moderates this effect: highly involved users prioritise information quality, while those less involved depend more on source authority and habit. Media providers therefore need to uphold both content quality and brand trustworthiness to stay appealing.

3.2 Trust Mechanisms

Under social e-commerce and influencer marketing, platform safeguards, the professional attributes of opinion leaders and user-to-user interaction can build trust, influencing purchase and usage decisions [9]. By contrast, excessive commercialisation, opaque information or unmet expectations erode trust, causing users to abandon specific sources or platforms [10]. To boost credibility, recommender systems and platforms are adopting trust-enhancing technologies, such as multi-criteria trust-aware collaborative filtering, blockchain-based traceability and expert review to increase transparency and recommendation accuracy [11].

Overall, source credibility and trust mechanisms are key drivers of users changing their media choices. Platforms that consistently demonstrate authority, high-quality content and robust technical trust mechanisms are likelier to secure users' long-term trust and continued use.

4. The Impact of Information Overload on Tourists

Within tourism, information overload is distinctive because tourism products are highly experiential, information searches are complex, and perceived decision risks

are significant. With the advent of Web 2.0 and user-generated content (UGC), tourism information has moved from being "scarce" to "abundant". This shift not only directly affects travellers' cognition and emotions, but also indirectly changes their choice of media by weakening information source credibility and trust mechanisms on platforms. Lv et al. [4] note that this shift has a profound effect on destination choice decisions.

4.1 Cognitive confusion and difficulty in decision-making.

Confronted with an overwhelming volume of information about destinations, accommodation and activities, tourists struggle to filter and integrate information effectively, often resulting in decision paralysis. Guo and Li [12], in an empirical study of online hotel booking, show that the size of the choice set and the amount of information both influence perceived overload, which in turn affects consumer decisions. Yin and Hwang [13] investigated information overload during the early stages of online booking and found that overload does occur and is shaped by the interaction between how information is presented and individuals' regulatory focus (promotion-focus vs. prevention-focus). They stress that when the presentation format aligns with a person's regulatory focus, information processing becomes smoother and overload is reduced.

4.2 Emotional volatility and media fatigue.

Information overload can provoke negative feelings such as anxiety and frustration, and lead to fatigue with or avoidance of certain information channels. Yun and Zhu [14], studying Korean and Chinese tourists, found that perceiving information overload can positively affect tourists' positive emotions, attitudes and information-seeking effort a finding that diverges from common assumptions and suggests that, up to a point, plentiful information can stimulate exploratory motivation, though its limits and adverse effects require caution. In contrast, Yan et al. [15] demonstrate that recommendation overload can drive users to stop using tourism recommender systems. Using the SSO framework and incorporating burnout and psychological resilience, they found that both information overload and system-functionality overload are significantly positively associated with discontinuation behaviour; recommender-system burnout mediates this effect, while psychological resilience moderates the link between system-functionality overload and burnout. This indicates that once overload reaches a threshold, negative emotions and avoidance behaviours become dominant.

4.3 Challenges of information veracity and credibility:

The deluge of information causes the proliferation of false, exaggerated or biased content, making it difficult for travellers to judge authenticity and thereby undermining

trust in information sources and platforms. Jiang and Liang [7], in their study of the influence of online self-media on young women's travel behaviour, emphasise that "the veracity of information on online self-media platforms is the foundation of all trust relationships." Pawłowska-Legwand [10] also explores reasons why people no longer trust influencer content, including "conspicuous advertising", "information filtering" and "negative experiences", all of which directly point to issues of information veracity and credibility.

4.4 How information overload alters media choice by affecting credibility and trust mechanisms:

Information overload reduces users' confidence in a single information source, forcing them to rely more on source authentication, professional endorsement or platform trust-enhancing mechanisms (for example verification badges, provenance technologies, expert review and user rating systems). When a platform can provide clear identity verification, transparent recommendation logic and reliable content moderation, users are more likely to remain on that platform; conversely, overload and opacity prompt users to migrate or avoid it. In other words, information overload does not change media use in isolation, but indirectly drives media migration by weakening or strengthening the credibility of information sources and platform trust mechanisms.

Information overload affects cognition and emotion and, by undermining judgements of authenticity and sense of trust, alters travellers' evaluations of platforms and information sources, thereby indirectly determining media choice. Understanding this mechanism is crucial for designing mitigation strategies.

5. How platforms should improve themselves to lessen the impact of information overload on users

To handle information overload effectively and maintain users' ongoing trust in and engagement with media, platforms must adopt a systemic, governance-wide approach. Single measures rarely work on their own; instead, progress is needed across technology, institutional arrangements and user education. Concretely, a sustainable governance strategy can be developed around three main areas:

5.1 Adopt designs that reduce information burden to raise processing efficiency.

Users of digital media are frequently swamped with large volumes of content. Without effective organization and filtering from platforms, their attention fragments. This often results in cognitive overload and decision fatigue. Therefore, platforms should adopt interface designs that

reduce information burden. The primary aim is to lower users' cognitive demands. This helps them concentrate more efficiently on what truly matters. Practical steps include deploying smarter personalized recommendation engines. For instance, collaborative filtering can be used. This technique combines multi-criteria scoring with implicit trust networks. It effectively cuts down on redundant information items. Platforms should also deliver content that is clearly structured and highly relevant. This content must be tailored to individual interests, time contexts, and habits. Improving information architecture is equally important. Useful tools include attribute comparison views, visual charts, and contextual summaries. These features help users grasp key differences and points quickly. Consequently, they can speed up their decision-making process. Over time, a "streamline rather than accumulate" design philosophy should be adopted. This approach will enhance the overall user experience. It will also reduce the anxiety and fatigue caused by information overload.

5.2 Build in trust visualisation to increase transparency of information sources.

Users face an overwhelming amount of information. They ask which sources they can trust. A platform loses loyalty when trust disappears. Platforms must build trust through visible tools, not slogans. Each post needs a clear origin tag. Institutional badges, expert notes, and algorithmic reputation trails show where content comes from. Users can post reviews and cross-check claims. This collective verification turns doubt into dialogue. Early-warning scripts scan for false material. Authority-verified items receive a green "credible" label. Disputed or unconfirmed items carry an orange flag. The flag prompts readers to pause and cross-check. These cues let users judge reliability at a glance. Transparent signals restore confidence in the platform.

5.3 Work together to raise users' information literacy and enable rational decision-making.

Media governance needs more than platform rules. Users must strengthen their own skills. Uncritical readers stay vulnerable even when tools exist. Platforms should teach, not just filter. They can embed tiny verification buttons beside every post. These buttons reveal source history in one click. Short slide tutorials can walk users through real hoaxes. Micro-quizzes after viral clips reinforce the lesson. Two-minute science reels can model critical questioning. A gentle prompt such as "Who wrote this?" can sit next to search results. This nudge reminds users to cross-check before sharing. Platforms can also praise "information diets." They can suggest timers and quiet hours to curb endless scrolling. Interactive lessons turn users into partners. Skilled audiences complete the governance loop.

To conclude, media platforms must act in concert across

system design, trust-building mechanisms and user education to create a closed loop of “technical governance — institutional safeguards — user empowerment”. This is the only way to tackle the cognitive load and trust deficits caused by information overload, support users in making better and more efficient decisions in a complex information landscape, and foster constructive, sustainable relationships between platforms and users.

6. Summary

Information overload has emerged as a key challenge for travellers’ decision-making in the digital age. Our systematic analysis shows that as information moves from scarcity to abundance, travellers suffer greater cognitive load and lower decision efficiency, and may also develop negative emotions and avoid media. Faced with many information channels, travellers are increasingly adjusting their media choices according to the credibility of sources and the operation of trust mechanisms, favouring platforms and content that are authoritative, transparent and professionally reliable.

To tackle information overload effectively requires coordinated, multi-dimensional measures: reducing information burden by using intelligent recommendations and optimised interfaces to ease cognitive strain; visualising trust by labelling sources and implementing verification to boost credibility; and improving information literacy so users can better evaluate and integrate information. Together, these approaches help travellers find valuable content in huge information volumes and enhance their decision-making experience.

Future studies should explore how information overload dynamically affects different stages of travel decision-making, how multimodal information presentation relates to overload, the psychological and cultural processes underpinning trust-building, and the ethics of recommender-system design. Such work will offer theoretical foundations and practical routes to a healthier, more sustainable tourism information ecosystem.

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