TikTok didn’t make me watch it: Information overload and advertising avoidance among Gen Z

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Over the years, social media platforms have grown and users are increasingly exposed to large volumes of content, leading to information overload. Consequently, this may trigger psychological strain and avoidance behaviours. Drawing on the Stressor-Strain-Outcome (SSO) framework, this study examines whether information overload predicts advertising avoidance among Gen Z female TikTok users who consume beauty-related content, and whether this relationship is mediated by psychological strain responses. Survey data from 316 respondents show that information overload is positively associated with affective, cognitive, and behavioural advertising avoidance, and that these relationships are fully mediated by frustration, dissatisfaction, and ambiguity-related confusion. Overall, the study suggests that on TikTok, information overload may undermine advertising effectiveness by generating psychological strain responses that drive avoidance.

Keywords: TikTok, information overload, frustration, dissatisfaction, ambiguity confusion, advertising avoidance, Gen Z

Introduction

The rapid growth of social media has generated an unprecedented abundance of content, increasing the volume of information users must process in everyday platform use (Dai et al., 2020). This development is particularly salient on short-video platforms, like TikTok, where users consume information through fast, continuous streams of content (Ye et al., 2022). TikTok has emerged as one of the world's largest social media platforms, reportedly reaching over 1.5 billion monthly active users, while millions of videos are uploaded daily (Sheperd, 2025; Statista, 2025). The platform is especially prominent among Generation Z (Gen Z), who constitute its largest user segment (Sheperd, 2025).

A key feature of TikTok is its algorithm-driven For You Page (FYP), which delivers a continuous stream of videos, including product information, recommendations, and advertising content tailored to users' interests and behavioural patterns (Nguyen et al., 2024). While this personalisation can drive engagement, it can also amplify information overload when the volume, complexity, and pace of incoming content exceed users' processing

capacity (Bhowmik, 2025). This dynamic is particularly salient in beauty-related social media content, where advertisements, product reviews, and influencer promotions compete simultaneously for attention (Ehsaei, 2024).

Prior research shows that information overload can trigger negative psychological responses, such as frustration, dissatisfaction, or confusion (Agnihotri et al., 2024; Dai et al., 2020; Gan, 2024; Laumer et al., 2015; Walsh et al., 2007; Ye et al., 2022). Consequently, consumers may become more likely to avoid advertisements (Yin et al., 2023). Drawing on the Stressor-Strain-Outcome (SSO) framework (Koeske & Koeske, 1993), which explains how environmental stressors translate into psychological strains and subsequent behavioural responses, we examine Gen Z users' exposure to beauty content on TikTok. Specifically, we model information overload as the stressor, frustration, dissatisfaction, and ambiguity confusion as strain responses, and advertising avoidance as the outcome.

Although information overload has been linked to information avoidance and social media discontinuance (Dai et al., 2020; Laumer et al., 2015), its effect on advertising avoidance has not yet been examined, to the best of the authors' knowledge. This gap is notable because it leaves unclear how information overload translates into negative advertising-related behavioural responses. Moreover, while the Stressor-Strain-Outcome (SSO) framework has been used in digital and social media settings (Agnihotri et al., 2024; Gan, 2024; Ye et al., 2022), its application to TikTok is still limited.

This study contributes to social media advertising and consumer behaviour research in the following ways. First, it explains how information overload translates into advertising avoidance in short-form video environments by modelling psychological strain responses as the underlying mechanism. In addition, it provides a more granular account of the outcome by examining affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions of advertising avoidance separately. Furthermore, it extends SSO-based information overload research to TikTok and

to Gen Z users' beauty-content exposure, highlighting how algorithmic personalisation and high-frequency promotional exposure can heighten psychological strain and, in turn, advertising avoidance. The findings also have practical and societal relevance: high-intensity promotional exposure on short-form video platforms may be counterproductive and raise concerns about potential psychological costs for Gen Z users.

Theoretical Background and Hypotheses Development

SSO Framework

Stressor-Strain-Outcome (SSO) framework provides a structured approach to understand how external stressors trigger psychological strain responses, which in turn lead to certain behavioural outcomes (Koeske & Koeske, 1993). Within this sequence, the strain is positioned as a mediator, meaning that stress does not directly influence the outcome but that the influence occurs only through its effect on the strain. The present study will apply the SSO framework to explore information overload (stressor), frustration, dissatisfaction, and ambiguity confusion (strains), and advertising avoidance (outcome). Figure 1 presents the conceptual model of the study.

Information overload

TikTok's For You Page (FYP) can expose users to high volumes of similar or repetitive content from multiple sources at a rapid pace, which can overwhelm their cognitive resources (Gan, 2024; Gunaratne et al., 2020). When the volume and pace of incoming information exceed users' processing capacity, users may experience information overload (Zhong et al., 2025). Prior research links social media information overload to negative affective responses, including frustration, dissatisfaction, confusion, and fatigue (Cheng et al., 2020; Dai et al., 2020; Laumer et al., 2015), as well as behavioural responses such as information avoidance, purchase avoidance, and social media discontinuance (Agnihotri et

al., 2024; Gan, 2024; Ye et al., 2022). Accordingly, we conceptualise information overload as the stressor in the SSO framework.

Frustration, dissatisfaction, and ambiguity confusion

Frustration is typically defined as a distressing emotion that arises when users are unable to satisfy their needs due to an intervening obstacle (Dai et al., 2020). In social media settings, high volumes of incoming information can overwhelm users' processing capacity, producing information overload and, in turn, frustration as an affective response. Following the incident causing this emotion, users are motivated to reduce or escape it, which can manifest in avoidant behaviour (Le & Ho, 2020).

Dissatisfaction reflects a negative evaluation that emerges when a platform's perceived performance falls short of users' expectations (Tsiros & Mittal, 2000). As dissatisfaction increases, users become less inclined to continue engaging with the platform and more likely to avoid it (Feng & Liao, 2025; Gan, 2024).

Consumer confusion is defined as "the negative cognitive and mental processes experienced by consumers while processing the information obtained and evaluating alternatives which complicate the decision-making process" (Özkan & Tolon, 2015, p. 32). Walsh et al. (2007) identified three dimensions: similarity confusion, overload confusion, and ambiguity confusion. This study focuses specifically on ambiguity confusion due to the high volume of beauty-related promotional content on TikTok, that may contain vague claims and appears in various formats, such as tutorials, product reviews, and beauty challenges (Ehsaei, 2024). Ambiguity confusion is "consumers' tolerance for processing unclear, misleading, or ambiguous product-related information or advertisements" (Walsh et al., 2007, p. 705). It occurs when consumers encounter questionable product claims or inconsistent information about the same product across different sources. Ambiguity confusion can lead to avoidance behaviour (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1997; Walsh et al., 2007).

Advertising avoidance

Advertising avoidance refers to actions users take to reduce their exposure to advertising content (Speck & Elliott, 1997). Cho and Cheon (2004) conceptualise three dimensions. Cognitive avoidance reflects deliberate inattention or mental disengagement (e.g., intentionally ignoring ads), affective avoidance reflects negative feelings toward advertising, and behavioural avoidance reflects overt actions that limit exposure (e.g., scrolling past or skipping) (Cho & Cheon, 2004; Kelly et al., 2019).

On TikTok, where promotional messages are integrated into a rapid, personalised feed, repeated exposure to advertising content can prompt users to express avoidant behaviour as a way to limit exposure to a distressing factor or escaping unpleasant emotions (De Castella et al., 2017). Consistent with SSO-based evidence that information overload predicts avoidance-oriented outcomes, such as information avoidance, purchase avoidance, and discontinuance (Agnihotri et al., 2024; Dai et al., 2020; Gan, 2024; Ye et al., 2022), we extend this logic to advertising avoidance in TikTok's short-form video environment.

Hypotheses development

The Mediating Role of Frustration

Prior research indicates that information overload is associated with higher frustration and that frustration, in turn, predicts avoidance-oriented responses (Dai et al., 2020). Facebook users reported a higher likelihood of reducing their usage due to frustration caught by information overload (Laumer et al., 2015). While information overload has been directly linked to avoidant behaviour, such as information avoidance and purchase avoidance, the SSO framework indicates that the effect is fully mediated by a psychological strain (Koeske & Koeske, 1993). Thus, users who experience frustration due to information overload from product-related content on TikTok may become more likely to avoid advertisements. Therefore, the following has been hypothesized:

H1: The influence of information overload on (*a*) affective, (*b*) cognitive, and (*c*) behavioural advertising avoidance is mediated by consumer frustration.

The Mediating Role of Dissatisfaction

Dissatisfaction resulting from information overload reduces usage intentions and may even lead users to discontinue platform use altogether (Feng & Liao, 2025; Gan, 2024). As prior research links dissatisfaction to withdrawal from the platform context (Feng & Liao, 2025; Gan, 2024), it is plausible that this strain also translates into avoidance of advertising content on TikTok. Thus, dissatisfaction is expected to mediate the relationship between information overload and advertising avoidance. Therefore, the following is hypothesized:

H2: The influence of information overload on (*a*) affective, (*b*) cognitive, and (*c*) behavioural advertising avoidance is mediated by consumer dissatisfaction.

The Mediating role of Ambiguity Confusion

Information overload may increase ambiguity confusion when users are exposed to high volumes of unclear, conflicting, or inconsistent product-related information and promotional claims (Özkan & Tolon, 2015; Walsh et al., 2007). This is especially likely in social media environments, where brand messages, influencer endorsements, and peer content may provide divergent evaluations of the same product. Under such conditions, users may struggle to interpret and evaluate the information available to them, increasing ambiguity confusion. Because ambiguity confusion is associated with avoidance-oriented responses to reduce uncertainty and cognitive burden (Mitchell & Papavassiliou, 1997; Walsh et al., 2007), it is expected to function as a psychological strain response linking information overload to advertising avoidance on TikTok, within the SSO framework. Accordingly, ambiguity confusion is expected to mediate the relationship between information overload and advertising avoidance. Therefore, the following is hypothesized:

H3: The influence of information overload on (*a*) affective, (*b*) cognitive, and (*c*) behavioural advertising avoidance is mediated by ambiguity confusion.

Methodology and Data

This study employed a quantitative survey design to test the proposed hypotheses. The target population was Gen Z female TikTok users aged 18–30 who regularly consume beauty-related content, given TikTok's relevance for following beauty trends (Seekis & Kennedy, 2023). Data were collected via an online questionnaire measuring information overload, frustration, dissatisfaction, ambiguity confusion, and advertising avoidance (affective, cognitive, and behavioural). Participants were recruited through Prolific using pre-screeners to identify eligible respondents (female, active TikTok users, aged 18–30). Active TikTok use for beauty content was secured through a screening question asking participants to confirm that they regularly view beauty-related content on TikTok (e.g., beauty products, tutorials, reviews, or influencer content). The final sample comprised 316 valid responses from 52 nationalities (M_{age} = 24.07, SD = 2.86).

All variables were measured using previously validated scales, adapted to the TikTok beauty-content context. All multi-item constructs were assessed on seven-point Likert scales ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Information overload (Karr-Wisniewski and Lu, 2010) and frustration (De Guinea et al., 2014) were measured with three items each. Dissatisfaction (Tsiros and Mittal, 2000) and ambiguity confusion (Walsh et al., 2007) were measured with four items each. Finally, advertising avoidance (Cho and Cheon (2004); Chinchanachokchai and De Gregorio, 2020) was measured with nine items capturing cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions. All multi-item constructs (see Table 1) showed acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha > .70$).

Results

Hypotheses were tested using Hayes' PROCESS (Model 4) with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Separate mediation models were estimated for each mediator across affective, cognitive, and behavioural advertising avoidance. Information overload showed positive total effects on all three advertising avoidance dimensions. Also, information overload increased frustration, dissatisfaction, and ambiguity confusion, and each strain response positively predicted all three advertising avoidance dimensions. Bootstrapped indirect effects were significant across mediators and advertising avoidance dimensions, supporting H1a–H1c, H2a–H2c, and H3a–H3c. In each model, the direct effects of information overload became non-significant once the mediator was included, consistent with full mediation. Detailed results are reported in Tables 2–5.

Discussion

The present study shows that frustration, dissatisfaction, and ambiguity confusion each fully mediate the relationship between information overload and advertising avoidance across affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions. This pattern is consistent with the Stressor-Strain-Outcome framework, which posits that stressors exert their influence through psychological strains rather than directly (Koeske & Koeske, 1993). Substantively, the full mediation highlights the importance of psychological responses in shaping behavioural outcomes. Gen Z users do not avoid advertising as a direct consequence of information overload itself, but rather because of the psychological strains it triggers. By examining affective, cognitive, and behavioural advertising avoidance separately, the findings show that each strain response is associated with all three dimensions, providing a more granular account of how avoidance manifests in short-form video environments.

Moreover, the findings extend current literature by applying the SSO framework to TikTok. The results confirm that the framework translates effectively in this context and

broadens prior applications beyond outcomes such as platform discontinuance and information avoidance. By focusing on TikTok and Gen Z users, the study enriches existing work (e.g., Agnihotri et al., 2024; Dai et al., 2020; Gan, 2024) by illustrating how platform affordances shape the experience and consequences of information overload. Specifically, algorithmic personalisation via the For You Page can amplify the intensity and repetition of category-consistent promotional exposure, while the platform's frictionless, fast-paced feed (autoplay, infinite scroll) increases the rate of information intake and reduces opportunities to pause and process. These findings suggest that digital consumer behaviour cannot be fully understood without accounting for platform-specific dynamics. Additionally, this suggests users may have limited control over the volume and repetition of TikTok content which creates conditions conducive to the strain responses identified in this study.

Lastly, advertising avoidance can function as a coping response that helps users manage cognitive strain under excessive information conditions (Dai et al., 2020). For Gen Z, this tendency may be reinforced by limited attentional capacity in fast-paced feeds. Prior work suggests that Gen Z's attention span in digital contexts may be around eight seconds (Shatto & Erwin, 2016), implying that users often make rapid keep-or-skip decisions. When an advertisement elicits negative emotions, appears repeatedly, or requires effortful processing, users may be less willing to invest attention and more likely to scroll past it. This dynamic is likely amplified on TikTok, where autoplay and continuous short-video streams encourage quick transitions and make avoidance an efficient way to reduce strain (Gan, 2024)

Managerial and Societal Implications

The findings emphasise the need to prioritise the development and implementation of a content moderation and curation system. Rather than maximizing screen time at all costs, platforms should prioritise relevance, manageability, and limited cognitive load. For brands and marketers, the mediating role of psychological strains emphasizes the importance of

simplifying product information, reducing ambiguity in advertising messages, and adopting value-driven, user-centric strategies that respect users' cognitive and emotional well-being. Marketers should leverage data analytics to tailor advertisements to user preferences and deliver them at optimal frequencies to avoid disengagement.

From a societal perspective, the results draw attention to the potential psychological costs of high-intensity promotional environments for Gen Z users. Although Gen Z are often characterised as digitally fluent and skilled at locating and comparing information online (Francis & Hoefel, 2018), the findings suggest that heavy, fast-paced promotional exposure can still contribute to overload and psychological strain. In other words, digital fluency does not necessarily protect users when the volume, pace, and repetition of promotional content exceed their capacity to process it comfortably.

Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides new insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the use of non-probability sampling limits the generalisability of the findings. In addition, minors were excluded for ethical reasons, meaning that the youngest segment of Gen Z was not represented. Second, the study focuses on TikTok and the beauty domain, which may limit generalisability to other platforms, advertising formats, and consumer contexts. Future research should test whether platform-specific features shape information overload and advertising avoidance across broader digital environments. Third, the study did not account for factors that may influence susceptibility to information overload and avoidance, such as product knowledge (Agnihotri et al., 2024), information processing capacity, or flow experience (Gan, 2024). Finally, individual differences, including intensity of social media use and digital literacy, may also moderate how users process promotional content and cope with strain responses.

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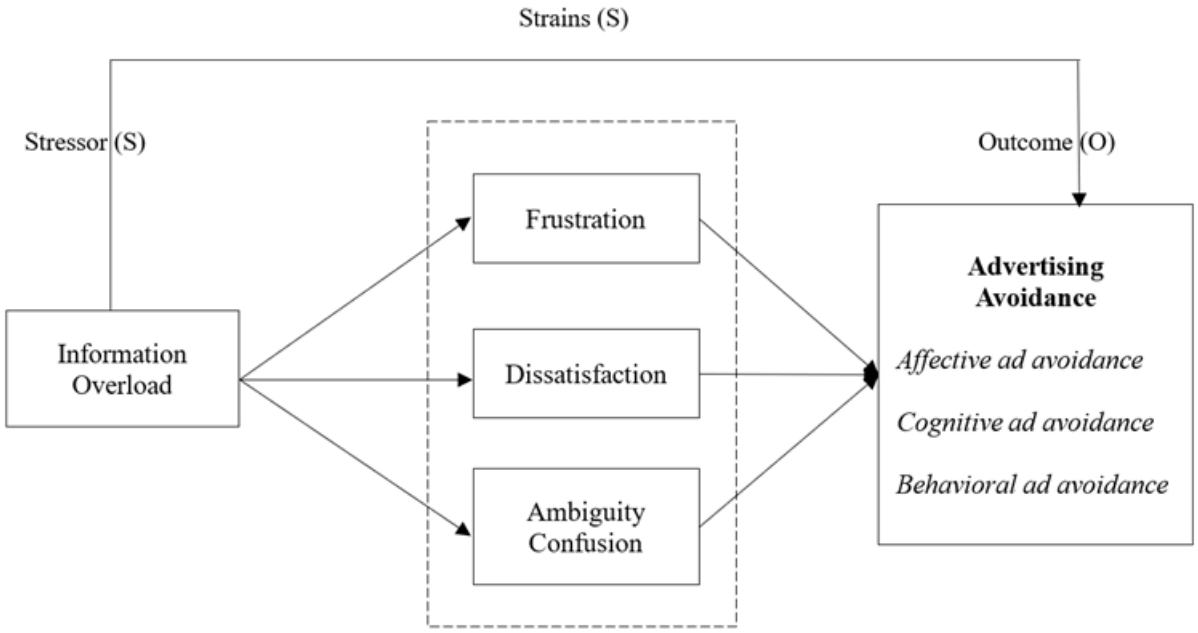

Figure 1. *Conceptual Model of the Study*

Table 1: Scales and Reliability analysis

Construct	**Construct Items**	**Cronbach's *α/ Spearman–Brown reliability***
Information overload (Karr-Wisniewski and Lu, 2010)	I am often distracted by the excessive amount of information about beauty products available to me on TikTok. I find that I am overwhelmed by the amount of information on TikTok about beauty products that I have to process on a daily basis. Usually, my problem is having too much information about beauty products on TikTok to process instead of not having enough information.	.71
Frustration (De Guinea et al., 2014)	Trying to view beauty product information on TikTok is a very frustrating experience. Being frustrated comes with viewing beauty product information on TikTok. Overall, I experience a lot of frustration using TikTok to view beauty product information.	.86
Dissatisfaction (Tsiros and Mittal, 2000)	I feel dissatisfied about my overall experience using TikTok for beauty products. I feel displeased about my overall experience using TikTok for beauty products. I feel discontented about my overall experience using TikTok for beauty products. I am not delighted about my overall experience using TikTok for beauty products.	.94

Ambiguity confusion (Walsh et al., 2007)	Beauty products I see on TikTok often have so many features that a comparison of different brands is barely possible. The information I see on TikTok is often so vague that it is hard to know what beauty products can actually perform. When viewing beauty products on TikTok, I rarely feel sufficiently informed. When viewing beauty products on TikTok, I feel uncertain as to product features that are particularly important for me.	.73
Advertising avoidance - cognitive (Cho and Cheon, 2004; Chinchanachokchai and De Gregorio, 2020)	I intentionally ignore any ads related to beauty products on TikTok I intentionally don't put my eyes on any ad related to beauty products on TikTok I intentionally don't pay attention to ads related to beauty products on TikTok. I intentionally don't click on any ads related to beauty products on TikTok, even if the ads draw my attention.	.79
Advertising avoidance - behavioural (Cho and Cheon, 2004; Chinchanachokchai and De Gregorio, 2020)	I scroll down past ads related to beauty products on TikTok I hide/close the ads related to beauty products to avoid them on TikTok I take any action to avoid ads related to beauty products on TikTok	.88
Advertising avoidance - affective (Cho and Cheon, 2004; Chinchanachokchai and De Gregorio, 2020)	I hate seeing ads related to beauty products on TikTok It would be better if there were no ads related to beauty products on TikTok	ρ=.79 (p<.001)

Table 2:Total effects of information overload on advertising avoidance dimensions

Outcome	**b**	**SE**	**t**	**p**	**95% CI**
Affective ad avoidance	.22	.07	3.07	= .0023	[.08, .36]
Behavioural ad avoidance	.17	.07	2.42	= .0159	[.03, .31]
Cognitive ad avoidance	.25	.06	4.21	< .001	[.13, .36]

Table 3: Mediation model with frustration as mediator

Outcome	**b path (Mediator → Outcome)**	**Direct effect c′ (IO → Outcome | Mediator)**	**Indirect effect**	**Bootstrapped 95% CI**
Affective ad avoidance	.39 (0.07), t = 5.82, p < .001	.05 (0.07), t = 0.67, p = .5051	.17	[.10, .25]
Cognitive ad avoidance	.34 (0.05), t = 6.35, p < .001	.10 (0.06), t = 1.59, p = .1120	.15	[.09, .22]

Behavioural ad avoidance	.38 (0.07), t = 5.72, p < .001	.01 (0.07), t = 0.08, p = .9383	.17	[.10, .24]

a path (Information overload → Frustration): .44 (0.06), t = 7.61, p < .001

Table 4: Mediation model with dissatisfaction as mediator

Outcome	**b path (Mediator → Outcome)**	**Direct effect c′ (IO → Outcome | Mediator)**	**Indirect effect**	**Bootstrapped 95% CI**
Affective ad avoidance	.48 (0.07), t = 7.21, p < .001	.06 (0.07), t = 0.87, p = .3831	.16	[.10, .23]
Cognitive ad avoidance	.49 (0.05), t = 9.45, p < .001	.08 (0.05), t = 1.55, p = .1232	.16	[.10, .23]
Behavioural ad avoidance	.49 (0.07), t = 7.55, p < .001	.01 (0.07), t = 0.12, p = .9028	.16	[.10, .24]

a path (Information overload → Dissatisfaction): .33 (0.06), t = 5.87, p < .001

Table 5: Mediation model with ambiguity confusion as mediator

Outcome	**b path (Mediator → Outcome)**	**Direct effect c′ (IO → Outcome | Mediator)**	**Indirect effect**	**Bootstrapped 95% CI**
Affective ad avoidance	.42 (0.10), t = 4.38, p < .001	.05 (0.08), t = 0.69, p = .4937	.17	[.08, .25]
Cognitive ad avoidance	.47 (0.08), t = 6.21, p < .001	.06 (0.06), t = 0.95, p = .3437	.19	[.12, .26]
Behavioural ad avoidance	.46 (0.09), t = 4.89, p < .001	-0.01 (0.08), t = -0.13, p = .8988	.18	[.10, .26]

a path (Information overload → Ambiguity confusion): .40 (0.04), t = 9.62, p < .001